

Fourth Sunday of Easter, B
Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
I John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

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Today on Good Shepherd Sunday, we are blessed with some really good news. Good news that gets even better, the more deeply we linger with scripture.

Good news comes from Jesus declaring: *I am the good shepherd*. Traditionally we imagine the shepherd as a gentle figure, carrying an injured lamb across his shoulders, seeking out the ones that get lost. A shepherd also had to be far-seeing to scout out vegetation in a barren land. And courageous, to fend off wild animals. And most of all dependable, to stay with the flock day and night, defending and providing for the ones in their care.

All of these qualities surround Jesus. He is gentle and caring, strong and dependable, and worthy of our trust. He is also courageous, like a shepherd so committed to the flock's well-being that he won't just defend them, he will even lay down his life for them, which is exactly what Christ did on the cross.

It is deeply comforting to know Jesus as our Good Shepherd, to experience Christ watching over us and helping us, whatever we are going through. We will never experience perfect safety in this world, but we do always live under the constant, watchful care of God, we do exist secure in Christ's love. So that whatever we are going through, whatever struggles or dangers, whatever hard times or conflicts or trouble, our life is always held and guarded by the Good Shepherd. We draw deep strength from this.

It's also a blessing to have Jesus as our leader and guide. We know what can happen when a leader is not trustworthy in a workplace, a school, in public life. When a leader is not looking out for the welfare of everyone, the group becomes anxious and fearful. Factions develop, there's competition for power. When nobody is providing for public safety, predators can run wild. Someone could get killed.

The Good Shepherd is the model for every leader. So that even on cynical days when we lose hope in human shepherds, through eyes of faith we see Christ the Good Shepherd leading us forward, guiding us into paths of righteousness and love, setting our sights toward God's ultimate rule of peace and justice, where the broken are healed, the vulnerable lifted up, all earth united in God's goodness.

And the blessing of the Good Shepherd is even more beautiful than we might realize. Because shepherds in Jesus' day were not powerful or influential or even respected. In fact, they were despised. A shepherd was someone with weathered skin and rough clothes, working hard day and night for almost nothing, sleeping outdoors and shunned by polite society. Yet Jesus calls this rough labor beautiful. Jesus is willing and eager to do rough labor for humanity, do whatever it takes to stand with those who are hurting and in need, and never give up until all people know the fruits of God's love.

The best news of all comes in just a few verses at the center of our reading. They might seem a bit mysterious. Jesus says, *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

Who are these "other sheep" Jesus is so interested in? In the past, Christians heard this as a call to convert the heathen and bring them into the Christian flock. Untold abuses and damage have been carried out in the name of Christian domination, all over the world. But as the world grows smaller, our perception has changed. We've grown in respect for other cultures and come to realize that many paths can lead to God. We're no longer driven to convert the nations -- thanks be to God! -- but still we have Christ's call to always look outward, beyond our own flock, beyond the comfort of belonging in Christ, to love our neighbor. Always asking,

If I am feeling blessed to belong... who is still being left out?
If I enjoy friendships that sustain me... who is still lonely?
If I have what I need to live... who doesn't yet have what they need?
If I enjoy privilege... who does not have privilege?
If I am safe... who is still unsafe?
If I am free... who is still oppressed?
If I am healthy... who is still sick and suffering?
If I am housed... who is still without housing?

Jesus says *I have other sheep...* So with the comfort of belonging to the Good Shepherd there also comes this element of holy discomfort, a loving and beautiful discomfort for the sake of the human family, a healthy striving that is God's striving to unite the human family across all its differences, unite it through divine, shepherding love.

We are all in the process of learning what this means.

I've appreciated the reflections of Pastor Angela Denker, a veteran journalist and Lutheran pastor who's been writing a blog about her own journey to recognize God's beloved ones beyond her own preconceptions and prejudice.

When Pastor Denker grew up in a comfortable Minneapolis suburb, she didn't know her city the way she is coming to know it now.

Back then when people talked about "good schools" and "good neighborhoods," I didn't realize we were talking about racism and redlining... I didn't realize that on the other side of my school district Black parents were having "the talk" with their teenage kids and younger, afraid of their Black sons being killed by police during a routine traffic stop.

My parents never told me that I had to put my hands on the steering wheel and say "yes sir," if I got pulled over. I was so naive the first time I did get pulled over for speeding, during high school, that I pulled to the left side of the highway. The officer got out, saw a blonde white girl behind the steering wheel, and calmly told me I had better get back on the road and pull back off to the right.

I've been pulled over a number of times since then in Minnesota. I've gotten speeding tickets and once a ticket from looking at my phone. One time, I'm embarrassed to say I didn't have my license with me, and the officer took my word for it and gave me a small ticket for something else.

American Christians talk a lot about grace, me included, but we don't seem to have the same grace for every American.

(All I Did Not See: Daunte Wright by Rev. Angela Denker, Church Anew Blog, 4/15/2021, and The Faith of the Floyds, Church Anew blog, 4/23/21, www.churchanew.org)

Isn't that the truth. This week our nation breathed a collective sigh of relief when former officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of murder for the death of George Floyd. We were awestruck by the dignity and faith expressed by George's younger brother Philonise Floyd (fa-LOAN-us) who reacted to the jury's decision not with bitterness, but by lifting up the name of Jesus and thanking God.

But how many people of color have been killed since that verdict came down?

Pastor Denker admits quite honestly that when she learns of a violent police confrontation that kills a person of color, her first instinct is to find some justification. To be more specific, her initial reaction is to find some fault with the victim, their actions, their life situation, their past choices... and find some excuse for the person who used deadly force. She has to fight against her own selfish, racist stories. To see more clearly what she does not at first wish to see. It is a process, a holy, faith-driven process that the Good Shepherd is employing to open her eyes. And she says,

I cannot see with anyone else's eyes. Only my own limited vision. But with humility, I can begin to chop down the logs in my own eyes, to see in front of me all the things I never saw before, the stories I wasn't told, the tears shed in silence, the videos of arrests and deaths the white public never got to see that replayed themselves in generational trauma for Black... families [and many others].

White America is seeing anew in Minnesota what Black America has lived for far too long. Shattering of illusions always feels devastating for those who've built stories of ourselves around those illusions: land of the free, home of the Brave, the American Dream.

The Good Shepherd has been teaching Pastor Denker, and us: *I have other sheep.* Other sheep I love and cherish. Beloved ones for you to love and cherish too.

Pastor Denker calls this process “ongoing revelation” -- but not the kind of revelation that blasts a shining vision on a mountaintop. The Good Shepherd’s revelation is a more complicated and powerful process:

as God continues to reveal truth to each of us, sometimes growing in faith resembles fumbling around in a dark and shadowy room, unable to decipher what is right in front of our eyes... Revelation means confusion and shadows and uncertainty and then sometimes seeing, clearly, what you once did not see.

Dear friends in Christ, I don’t know about you, but that sums up truthfully where God has been leading me in the last couple of years, and so many of us in First Immanuel congregation. I’m all in with God opening my eyes and our eyes to how things really are, for the sake of love and justice. I’m not planning to give this up, and I know the Good Shepherd won’t give up on us either.

It’s been said many times before. Human beings will always try to draw a circle around the flock they wish to call their own. A circle that says who’s in and who’s out, who matters and who doesn’t, who we should care about and who we don’t have to. But no matter what circle you try to draw, Christ the Good Shepherd stands outside that circle, saying *I have other sheep.*

And truly, this is good news, the best of all. Christ the Good Shepherd both comforts us and also keeps on challenging us, for the sake of God’s greater love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.