

4 Easter                      Psalm 23              John 10:22-30  
Christ and Grace            May 12, 2019  
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It's Good Shepherd Sunday, in case you hadn't figured it out. The hymns might have given it away, or the opening collect. Most of us know the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, if not the version we read today, then the King James Version we hear at so many funerals. Earlier in chapter 10 of John, Jesus tells us he is the Good Shepherd. Where our text picks up today he's fielding questions about that. The text from Revelation mentions the Lamb on the throne who will be our shepherd. Even the Acts passage describing Dorcas/Tabitha tells of the ways she cared, as a good shepherd would, for her community.

It's also Mother's Day, and although it's not on the Church calendar, we can think of mothers, on their better days, as being shepherds; in fact we can think of many in our lives who have been shepherds for us.

Today is also the day we honor our seniors who are heading off to college – leaving our sheepfold to graze in new pastures. And we know that Jesus the Good Shepherd will lead them with every goodness and mercy as they venture forth.

In thinking about Jesus the Good Shepherd we can sometimes get all caught up in the metaphor and picture precious lambs in the arms of Jesus. But lambs quickly turn into sheep – smelly, dirty tangles of wool on four legs that are prone to wander into all kinds of trouble. And one reason the imagery of sheep and shepherd has been used for so long to describe the human condition is because just like sheep, we are also prone to wander into all kinds of trouble; hence the need for a shepherd.

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then it might be helpful for us to know the definition of a bad shepherd, and we find that in Ezekiel, chapter 34. In Ezekiel's time and long before that, shepherd imagery frequently described ancient Near Eastern royalty. In other words, kings were called shepherds. The assumption was that kings were good and their function was to care for the people as shepherds care for their sheep. "The king as a shepherd and as a representative of the gods was expected to rule with justice and to show kindness in counseling, protecting, and guiding the people through every difficulty"<sup>1</sup>, but that was not always the case.

When the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, it was clear that God was not pleased with the shepherds, the kings of Israel. "Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?"<sup>2</sup>

In the Hebrew scripture, each time a new shepherd king ascends to the throne there is a qualifying statement about the new king. If he was a good king the text says, King Josiah did what was right in the sight of the Lord. And if he was a bad king the text says, King Ahab did

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<sup>1</sup> Anchor Bible Dictionary [1992]

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 34:2 NRSV

what was evil in the sight of the Lord. So right away, you know what kind of a king this one will be and you can begin to anticipate how the story will go.

And so right away, when Jesus began telling the Jews gathered around him in the temple that he was the Good Shepherd, everyone listening would connect that to the Prophet Ezekiel's descriptions of shepherds. According to Ezekiel, bad shepherds, the bad kings of Israel, fed themselves and not the sheep, they did not strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays or seek the lost. Instead they ruled the sheep with force and harshness.

In contrast, good shepherds search for and seek out the sheep. Ezekiel says they rescue the sheep and feed them with good pasture, and the sheep lie down in good grazing land. They find the lost, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak in the flock. Ezekiel then prophesies that God will send them his servant, who will be like David, to feed them and make with them a covenant of peace. "You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God."

Remembering Ezekiel's words, and then hearing Jesus say he is the Good Shepherd and that he and the Father are one surely caught the attention of those gathered around Jesus. As we hear those words today, do they catch our attention? What does it mean to have Jesus the Good Shepherd in our lives now?

In a world filled with both bad and good shepherds we need the Good Shepherd more than ever. In a world where sheep are homeless and hungry, and lambs are victims of gun violence we need the Good Shepherd. When the diagnosis comes back positive or the job termination lands on our desk we need the Good Shepherd. When we struggle with things done and left undone and think we are not good enough, or smart enough we need the Good Shepherd.

Jesus calls us to follow, to be shepherds in the example he has set for us. There are bad and good shepherds in this world. Which will we follow, and which will we be?

In Psalm 23 we see that we are not promised that there will be no valleys, evil, or death. All of that is a part of our earthly life. We will all walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The promise is that it is but a shadow, not the complete reality. The promise is that even when things are as bad as they can be, even in the midst of death Jesus promises, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand."

Now that we know what it means for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd, let's say Psalm 23 again together, knowing that we belong to the Good Shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd; \* I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures \* and leads me beside still waters.  
He revives my soul \* and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; \*  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*  
you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.  
Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.