

April 17, 2016



## "Christian Basics: Learning to Trust"

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

*Psalm 23*

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

*John 10:25-30*

*Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 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. The Father and I are one."*

Across these Sundays following the great Easter day, the church is called to live into the meaning and power of the resurrection promise. What does it mean—for us? Who is this Christ in whom we find life? Our "Christian Basics" sermon series is designed to address just such questions: What do I really believe? In what can I trust? Where do I find real peace? What difference does all this make for my life?

During this season, for as long as anyone can remember, the church has set aside this Fourth Sunday of Easter and called it "Good Shepherd Sunday."

On this day we hear again the words of the familiar 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul..." And the Gospel comes from the Gospel of John where Jesus speaks of himself as the "good shepherd."

Who is this Good Shepherd for us? And how can we learn to trust in such loving care?

You know, through the Eastertide season, many of our hymns and anthems and prayers and liturgies lift up other names and metaphors for the Resurrected Christ—Messiah, Savior, Lord, King of Kings. These are all images of power and victory and triumph, appropriate, yes, for this Easter season in which God in Christ has conquered death and set him above all powers and principalities of this world.

But isn't it interesting that, of all those names, all those ways of thinking about and experiencing Christ, on this Fourth Sunday in Eastertide, we pause, as it were, to take a deep breath and remind ourselves that Christ is our Good Shepherd.

This is a name that speaks more to our hearts, to our deepest longings, than to all clang and glitter of the world. We're not gloating about being victors here. We're not trumpeting the conquests of our king. No—today, on this Good Shepherd Sunday, we are grounding our faith, we are centering our lives, we are entrusting our care to the promise of the Good Shepherd—Christ who is with us, always, who guides us, shelters us, lifts us, protects us, loves us.

We hear him speaking as the Good Shepherd to his own sheep, the sheep of his flock: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

Of course, images of shepherds and sheep, as metaphors for God and God's people, are woven throughout the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments. This makes perfect sense when we think about the role sheep played in life and economy of the holy lands for generations and generations, providing food and wool for clothing. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Moses, and King David, the psalmist, were all shepherds.

The good work of the shepherd was essential to the well-being of the people. They nurtured and tended the flocks. They moved their flocks to fertile, green pastures, making sure they had grass and water. They knew each lamb. And the sheep knew the shepherd's voice as a voice they could trust and follow.

In protecting their flocks, shepherds face danger every day. They must contend with floods, freezing winds and driving snow, with heat and drought. They must fend off thieves and robbers, smugglers, poachers, wild animals—wolves, panthers, hyenas, jackals, coyotes. They lay themselves down for a night's rest in the gap of the fence, their own body becoming the gate that keeps the sheep in and any threat out. They do whatever they need to do to protect their flock.

The love of a shepherd is tender and it is fierce. A shepherd cannot take away the dangerous things of this world, but the shepherd is willing to do anything, willing to give everything—for the flock. Jesus said it this way: "I am the Good Shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Although sheep and shepherds may no longer be part of our daily vocabulary, the powerful message behind this ancient imagery is as important for us today as ever—that is, in whom can we trust? Where can we place our trust? Can we go to sleep at night knowing that our lives are in the care of a loving God who loves as a shepherd loves?

How do we learn to trust? Well, on this day that we rejoice to baptize Dominic Edward, we remember that babies learn to trust—or not—right from the get go. Long before they can form words and talk, babies' brains are constantly making

connections and coming to understandings about the world around them and how it works. During the first year of life, babies learn one of their most important lessons—one expert in child development labeled this lesson “trust vs. mistrust.” What babies experience early on completely shapes the way they view the world during the rest of their lives. They learn that they can trust the people around them (that the world is fundamentally good), or they learn that they cannot rely on others to help and comfort them (that the world is fundamentally bad).

How do they learn this? From parents and grand-parents, and nannies and caregivers, godparents, aunts and uncles, community of faith...all those who respond to their needs in consistent and caring ways. As one child development professional has said: “It is IMPOSSIBLE to spoil a baby with too much affection, attention, or love. Babies who are held and cuddled frequently will not become clingy, needy older children. In fact, research has shown that babies who form strong, loving bonds with their parents are MORE independent as children. These babies *know* that someone who loves them is looking out for their best interests. Thus, they feel safer and more empowered to venture out into the world, grow, and learn new things.”

This is why we pledge, in our baptismal liturgy: “We will surround you, Dominic, with a community of love and forgiveness, that you may grow in your trust of God and be found faithful in service to others.”

And as for us so-called “grown-ups,” it makes sense to me to think that God, who gave us Jesus in the form of just such a baby, understands our need to learn to trust. And sees, over and over again, how quickly we forget our need of God. How we scramble about wanting to place our trust in the wrong things. Buy a lot of things and we’ll feel secure. Squirrel away our money and we’ll be secure. Follow the right diet or fitness guru and we’ll be secure. And so on and so forth. I bet you have your own private list of both things that provide a sense of security and things that scare you to death.

Now I’m not saying that being stupid or making bad choices is a good way to live your life. But what I am saying, what I think the Resurrected Christ is showing us when he calls himself the Good Shepherd and says: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand”...what Christ is reminding us is that we are well served to put our trust in him. He is reminding us that he is our shepherd, whose love is tender and fierce, like the love of a parent. He is the shepherd in whom we can put our trust.

I love that when this sanctuary was built, our beautiful Good Shepherd window in the balcony of our sanctuary was designed for us by the artists at Judson Studios in South Pasadena.

The choir and I can see it well each Sunday—most of you will want to take a moment after church today and look up and take it in. At night, this window is lighted from within so that the Good Shepherd shines out upon our neighborhood with love and compassion. It is the primary visual we offer to our neighbors each night.

Look and you will see a gentle Jesus, carrying his shepherd’s crook, cradling a lamb in his arm. They are in a lush, verdant place, where the water is still. His red robe signifies humanity, life on earth, the blood of the martyrs. The white robe signifies resurrection and the light of heaven. The sheep at his feet looks up to his face with a look of trust and peace. Christ is calm, strong, God’s promise in whom we trust.

When Dominic was born and I learned his name, I smiled. Dominic means “of the Lord, or belonging to God.” His mom, Sarah, tells me that she and his dad, Dane, didn’t realize this when they picked it—they just liked how it sounded. Well, baby Dominic, you truly do belong to God, a sheep of Christ’s fold, a lamb of his flock. He will call you by name and you will recognize his voice. He will protect your going out and your coming in. And this day we welcome you to this community of faith who follow him as the Way, the Truth and the Life. May he be our Good Shepherd, and yours, and may we dwell in his house forever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.