

April 26, 2015

“The King of Love”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



John 10:11-18

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

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?

In all our hymns and prayers and liturgies, the church lifts up a variety of names and metaphors for Christ—Messiah, Savior, Lord, King of Kings—we'll hear a bit of that one in our choir's anthem this morning. 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, the church, for as long as anyone can remember, has set aside this Fourth Sunday of Easter in the church year and called it "Good Shepherd Sunday." The Gospel comes from the Gospel of John where Jesus speaks of himself as the "good shepherd. And it is on this day that we hear the words of the familiar 23rd 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..."

These are words that speak 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. Who is this Christ in whom we find life? The king of *love* my shepherd is.

Do we not cherish that beautiful promise in the 23rd Psalm, to which God's people have clung for generations and generations: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever..."

All those of you of a certain age attend many memorial services here and most times we recite the words of this Psalm together—as we did yesterday in the memorial service for Shelly McCammon. In that context, those words about dwelling in the house of the Lord forever cause us to think of eternal life. For in those precious times of remembrance and celebration of the life of one of God's saints, we also hear Jesus' words that "in God's house are many mansions" and that he has gone there to prepare a place for us. Jesus, who surely would have known the 23rd Psalm by heart, Jesus who in the 10th Chapter of John's Gospel this morning, 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."

The 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 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." And so, through these Sundays of Eastertide, we journey on with our crucified and resurrected Lord. Through the valley of the shadow of death. For the Good Shepherd has laid down his life for the flock with a love that is tender and fierce.

A preacher's craft is mostly in words. But today I wanted to give you two beautiful visual images of our Good Shepherd. I want to invite you to actually take these out and look at them as I continue speaking. The first is on the cover of your order of worship. It is of course the stained glass window here in the balcony of our sanctuary. It was designed for us by the artists at Judson Studios in South Pasadena when the sanctuary was built.

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.

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.

The second image for you to take with you this morning is by our own "artist-in-residence" as we like to call him, John August Swanson. It is his serigraph of the 23rd Psalm. It is a depiction of what the Psalm calls "the valley of the shadow of death." And yet, as Swanson reveals, that valley is not a scary place. The night sky is full of twinkling stars. All the creatures God has created, the lion, the lamb, birds, deer, rabbits, an owl, are resting quietly and peacefully. And in the center of the piece are two travelers and their little dog, moving forward together, carrying lanterns glowing with a warm light. They are no longer alone or afraid. Their faces show no fear, for, as Swanson has noted, they have been transformed by their trust in God's peaceable kingdom, and by the presence of God with them.

In Swanson's portrayal, we see that the Good Shepherd's love has transfigured heaven and earth. They glow with light. They are animated by love. We are astonished to see that God's house where Christ now abides forever, God's house is the garden made new, a place of abundance and beauty, a place of vibrant and nourishing green pastures, a place of deep, still waters, where silence carries us to the wellsprings of our faith. It is where the lion and the lamb rest in peace and all creation rejoices, where the creatures safely dwell, where we walk safely through whatever may come, enfolded in the arms of the love of God.

On Good Shepherd Sunday, we affirm our conviction that the shepherd of the 23rd Psalm has become flesh in Christ Jesus, who laid down his life for his flock and has now been raised from the dead. He is present with us now in death's shadow and darkness and in life's radiant joy and light. We belong to him and he will cherish us as his own, forever and ever. Who is this Christ in whom we find life? The king of *love* my shepherd is.

This promise of God with us runs like a thread throughout all of Scripture. Its corollary is repeated more than any other phrase in the Bible: fear not. Since God is with us, there is nothing to fear. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And so, we sing:

"The king of love, my shepherd is, his goodness faileth never.
I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill, with thee, dear Lord, beside me;
thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.

And so through all the length of days, thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house forever."

Amen.

Notes:

John B. Rogers in Feasting on the Word, Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C Vol. 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

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