



*Both Sheep and Good Shepherds*

April 25, 2021: Liturgy of the Word for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: may your Word only be spoken, and may your Word only be heard; in the name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. **Amen.**

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

By tradition, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter is called Good Shepherd Sunday. I'm not sure where or when this tradition began. But today, on this Sunday, the readings and music are full of pastoral images of sheep and shepherds.

Chief among these readings is the beloved 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and this particular passage from the Gospel of John, both of them, not coincidentally, used often at funerals as sources of solace, strength and comfort. Our lovely gradual hymn gives us a musical rendering of these same truths about Jesus' pastoral care for us, as do the choral prelude and offertory anthem. All these texts and tunes remind us of Jesus' love and strength.

And by tradition, a preacher will often explore the traditions of first century shepherding, the character of sheep, and so forth, to try to help us moderns imagine the ways that rich and extensive biblical imagery is applicable to us as modern people. Often, the emphasis hovers around that idea that sheep are kind of stupid and need lots of direction. That they are prone to wander off and get lost and into trouble.

And then the preacher would draw parallels to our own human tendencies to wander off and lose our way, to succumb to selfishness and evil. And then the preacher would remark on how we need a Good Shepherd, not a hired hand, who loves and protects us and lays down his life for us, who keeps the wolf away, who would even leave behind 99 sheep to find one that's lost. And that's the Jesus we need.

And that would be fine as far as it goes. But I think this way of thinking lets us humans off a bit too easy, and it may even be a bit unfair and insulting to sheep. And it obscures the fact that as Christians, we may behave like sheep, but we also are meant to behave like Good Shepherds.

The writer of the First Letter to John reminds his readers and listeners this morning that, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3.16)

There it is: the call to be Good Shepherds, and not simply to wallow in our identity as sheep.

As Martin Luther used to say, we are all sinners *and* saints. I would say, we are all sheep and good shepherds. As Jesus says it, this means laying down one's life for sheep.



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And it seems clear, in the Gospel this morning as Jesus speaks to his listeners, both within the narrative that we hear in John, and through time and space by the Holy Spirit to us, that he has an expansive view of the sheepfold; that is, we are mistaken if we think we know exactly who Jesus' sheep are. The very moment we try to separate who's in from who's out, we are big in trouble. Our Baptismal Covenant tells us to seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

But what does it mean to lay down one's life for the sheep? Not in some controlling, patronizing, patriarchal way, but in a way that emphasizes selflessness and self-sacrifice?

We don't have to look too far in a pandemic to see who has been doing that, who's been laying down their lives. Essential workers of all stripes, medical professionals of all kinds, all those who have been working sacrificial hours and conditions to keep things clean, to care for the sick, to keep commerce going, to educate our children.

But there are other ways too, to imagine what it means to be a good shepherd. This week, many remember the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the mass killings and deportations of ethnic Armenians within the crumbling Ottoman Empire during the First World War. This remembrance should remind us to stand up against bullies, laying down our comfortable privilege to protect the vulnerable.

You may have heard the quote from the German Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemöller, who spoke out against Hitler, then spent 7 years in prison. It goes like this: "First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>

This past Thursday, we also marked the celebration of the 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Earth Day. If the climate crisis has done nothing else, if you've been paying attention, it has raised the question of what parts of our lives, what habits do we need to lay down, in order for there to be continued human survival on the planet?

We lay down our lives when we let go of our own ego needs. Those who have been parents, for example, are aware of the tension between tending to our needs, and attending to the needs of our children, especially in a pandemic.

Laying down our lives can mean letting go of defensiveness in order to listen to the stories of those whose experiences have differed greatly from our own. For example, the movement that grew out of the death of George Floyd, and the verdict of the jury in the trial of the officer who killed him, reminds us of the need to pay attention to those whose encounters with law enforcement, as well as lots of other aspects of daily living, are impacted by the mere color of one's skin. This likely means laying down the unconscious privilege of ignoring the issue of race as a critical part of our historical and contemporary narrative.



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When we lay down our lives for the protection of the sheep, we grow into the stature of Christ. The fact that Christ is alive and risen is made visible and real when we live out, and live into, our calling to be good shepherds. In fact, God depends on us to be good shepherds. God is constantly offering us opportunities to be God's presence for other people, to lay down our lives for the sheep.

You may be familiar with the words of St. Teresa of Avila, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite nun. They bear repeating. I paraphrase a bit:

“Christ has no body but ours, no hands, no feet on earth but ours. Ours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world. Ours are the feet with which he walks to do good, ours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Ours are the hands, ours are the feet, ours are the eyes, we are his Body. Christ has no body now but ours, no hands, no feet on earth but ours. Ours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but ours.” <https://catholic-link.org/quotes/st-teresa-of-avila-quote-christ-has-no-body-but-yours/>

We are all sinners and saints, sheep *and* good shepherds.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.