



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 22, 2018
ACTS 4:5-12; PSALM 23; 1 JOHN 3:16-24; JOHN 10:11-18

LESSONS FROM THE FLOCK

John 10:11-18 [Jesus said, “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.]

As you’ve probably gathered, today is Good Shepherd Sunday. It is that time in the Easter season when a discernible shift begins. The personal, eyewitness encounters of the Risen Christ give way to something new. Today, Jesus speaks directly to us. His is the sole voice we hear in the gospel. It’s an invitation to pay attention with care.

Using the image of an ideal shepherd, Jesus highlights something important: the nature and purpose of God’s interaction

with us. Jesus also uses the image for something else: to measure his own life and purpose in relation to God. ...and Jesus invites us to use that same lens of the shepherd we contemplate our own relationship with him, with each other, and with God.

For generations, protecting and providing for the flock have been at the heart of a shepherd’s work. As Psalm 23 points out, tending the flock is no ordinary, simple task. In this beloved psalm, the Lord is cast

into the role as our shepherd. The final verse asserts the Lord's "goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives."¹ Both the NRSV and the King James versions invite us to imagine a divine shepherd who carefully "follows" us. That divine caretaker shadows us, perhaps at a distance and in a way that a parent might when her child ventures out for the first time on her own.

But it turns out God's desire for us is much greater than any mild, cautious interest. The Hebrew text expresses a longing on God's part that is urgent, intense, and deeply personal. Rather than following us, the text says that God *pursues* us.

God's mercy and steadfast love chase us down all the way to the end of our existence. Regardless of how far the flock wanders or how lost we become, God's deep care *and* longing are always with us. God's presence is unshakable. God tirelessly seeks out the flock to the exclusion of all else. For Jesus and for us, that is what it means to be a good shepherd.

Sam Wells, who is the vicar of St. Martin's-in-the-Field in London, says that God's greatest desire is to be in

relationship with us. "God's fundamental purpose is to be with us -- not primarily to rescue us, or even empower us, but to be with us, to share our existence, to enjoy our hopes and fears, our delights and griefs, our triumphs and disasters."² Wells goes on to say, "all other actions of God [prepare the way] for the fundamental purpose of creation, salvation, and final redemption: God being with us. That's all that was ever in God's heart, and all that ever shall be."³

This desire by God for relationship is so fundamental, in fact, that only one thing in all of scripture is named as "not good": loneliness.⁴ Being isolated from others and from God is the one thing in creation to be avoided at all costs. Arguably, anyone who intentionally causes another to suffer loneliness or who intentionally harms or prevents relationship commits a great sin before God.

That is the problem with the hired hand in today's Gospel. When trouble arrives, the hired hand immediately gives up and runs away. Rather than engaging in the difficult, dangerous work of relationship tending, the hired hand chooses convenience over commitment. He decides to take care of himself first. He chooses to abdicate his duty to care for

¹Psalm 23:6 (NRSV).

²Sam Wells, "The Power of Being With," *Christian Century*, (June 24, 2015): 32.

³Ibid.

⁴See Genesis 2:18.

anyone else. He chooses to sever the relationship, opting instead for an existence that ultimately isolates him from everyone and everything else.

The Good Shepherd models another way. Unlike the hired hand, the Good Shepherd sticks with the flock through every trial and joy that life brings. The Good Shepherd's commitment doesn't end there. When one of the flock is lost, the Shepherd will seek him out and bring him back while the rest of the flock waits. The Good Shepherd's commitment doesn't end there either. The desire for relationship is so strong that Shepherd will follow each one of the flock up to and into the grave. In fact, that commitment to be with the flock is so strong not even death deters the Shepherd. Remarkably, the Good Shepherd keeps on seeking out the flock when they and we emerge on the other side of the tomb. That is one of the great lessons of the resurrection: God's longing for us is so great that nothing, not even death, can sever God's relationship to us.

Jesus knows this, and that truth sets him free. When he is baptized, Jesus clearly hears his name called from the heavens. At that moment, Jesus knows unequivocally he belongs to God. Through his baptism, Jesus also experiences an unwavering desire to be

with God. But belonging is about more than a one-time event, and desire, if it is more than a fleeting urge, ultimately requires action.

Jesus discovers his unwavering desire for God also means an unconditional desire to be with others. For Jesus, being with God means being with everyone else, too, especially those otherwise cut off from society. Like God, Jesus begins to tirelessly seek out the flock to the exclusion of all else. While that costs him his life, it doesn't cost him God. God's unshakable presence follows Jesus throughout his life, into the grave and then beyond into resurrection. That unshakable presence allows Jesus to become an ideal member of the flock. It also allows Jesus to become the model shepherd we choose to follow.

So what does the story of the Good Shepherd teach us today? How do we, like Jesus, learn to be with God and each other just as God is with us? A friend shared a story that may put this into perspective.

Several weeks ago, my friend noticed a man lingering outside the store where she works. The man would sit huddled up on a sidewalk at the edge of the store's property. When he first showed up, the man was quiet and left people alone. Over time though, the man grew increasingly distraught and animated. Several people at the store tried to talk with him hoping

to calm him down. Their efforts only agitated him more. When customers began to shy away from the store, the manager decided it was time to call the police. Before he did, my friend asked if she could try connecting with him one last time.

In what can only be explained as one of those “God moments,” she decided to try something very simple. She said one word to him: his first name. At first, nothing happened. But then, something changed. Almost immediately, he settled down. He looked at her, and he started to talk to her. Something shifted inside him when he heard his name. Hearing his name on the

lips of someone else meant he was known and cared for by another person. It meant someone else wanted to connect with him, just as he was being invited to connect with her. ...and perhaps, it signaled God’s own unshakable desire and deep longing to be with him.

The Good Shepherd reveals a God who delights in our presence and will do anything to be us. This Easter season, may we know the joy of that gift and have the courage to follow.

Amen.



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