



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SCRIPTURE TEXTS FOR APRIL 21, 2024,
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR B ARE:
ACTS 4:5-12; PSALM 23; 1 JOHN 3:16-24; JOHN 10:11-18

A GOOD SHEPHERD, THE COSMIC CHRIST AND EARTH DAY

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."]

Have you ever tried to see something that just cannot be seen?

I bet at some point in your childhood, you discovered the mystery of the refrigerator light—how it always seemed to know when

you were coming for a glass of milk or cold snack—you open the door and, bam, the light was on. Did it stay on all the time, or did it just know when you were coming? Something of a Schrodinger's cat experiment...

Eventually, I bet, you discovered the little lever at the door's inside frame that was the light's on-off switch, which (if you were anything like me) you promptly spent countless kilowatts pushing and letting go—your own circuit of glee and power, until your mom shooed you out of the kitchen.

And can you remember the first time you were staring at your image in a mirror, and in a moment of uneasy self-consciousness, you discover the eyes always seemed to be staring right at you. You'd turn away, and steal a quick sideways glance, trying to catch a glimpse of the eyes not yet watching you, but there they were—those curious eyes glaring straight on. The empirical trial failed every time.

Or in a defiant show of disinterest, you'd turn away and then slowly gaze back, using peripheral vision, trying not to see the eyes, and there is nothing, nothing, nothing, until you reach the point at which the retina's mirror meets the eyes which give an

impertinent glare, like they've been waiting all day to be seen again.¹

It stops us short, doesn't it, to almost see something, but not quite?

And catching a tangible glimpse of God seems, for most of us, that elusive, close-but-not-quite, enterprise of life. Even though God is always present, always ready, longing to be seen with eyes that open to the soul, extending an invitation into the creative forces of goodness.

Here we are on the fourth Sunday of Easter, the 22nd day of Easter, essentially halfway through our seven-week celebration, and we move from post-resurrection stories that bring the gospels to a close, returning instead to John's 10th chapter—literally, smack-dab in the middle of John's epic story of the cosmic Christ come among us, and today we get images of a gentle, caring shepherd.

This is Good Shepherd Sunday, whom we are invited to follow.

¹ This illustration was shared by good friend and fellow preacher, Scott Walters several years ago as an exegetical foray into a different passage of Scripture, but the thematic

examples are delightful, experienced by most of us, and serve as theological fodder for us all.

At first glance, we conjure images of agrarian scenes, bleating sheep grazing beside still waters, shepherd tending his flock with fierce devotion that means these animals are more than mere provisions in life; these are the ones to whom he is so committed that he is willing to lay down his life for them. The one who provides, protects, and goes seeking the lost one no count the cost.

This is covenantal imagery, deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian psyche, that says long before we ever thought about looking in God's direction, God was gazing upon us in steadfast love and mercy. Surely, God's goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. Nothing in all creation can break the indissoluble bond of that covenant.

I'm reminded of the difference between a contract and covenant. Two parties enter a contract define by legal terms. A handshake seals the deal but can be broken easily enough.

A covenant forges the relationship that extends beyond the terms of an agreement, and even if one party strays from the relationship, as we are wont to do, the other party holds on until we are ready to return.

Steadfast love and mercy are the signature aspects of this divine covenant.

Tomorrow, on the 22nd day of April, many of us will observe Earth Day, a modern secular observance meant to draw us into the orbit of earth's climate crisis, inviting us to see what is true and good and beautiful about the natural world in which we live, while also casting our eyes upon the trajectory of catastrophic changes and ecological collapse.

The truth is, try as we might, we can't see greenhouse gases rising; we can't comprehend polar ice caps shrinking by the square miles; we can't fathom millions of barrels of oil spilled into the ocean; we can't get our heads around the fact that the natural extinction rate for species has increased 10,000 percent in the last century as a result of humanity's adverse effects on ecosystems.

Try as we might, we can't quite see these things...as long as we are looking at ourselves in the proverbial mirror. All we will ever see is our own eyes staring back at us, convincing us of the merit of selfish consumption and neglect.

The image of the good shepherd is, at first glance, a sweet pastoral scene of meekness, but make no mistake, the fierce and abiding truth when we gaze more deeply is that this shepherd is none other than the cosmic Christ, the one who has come to dwell among us, the Incarnate Word who has breathed goodness into creation and us, the one who has cast a vision of healing for all creation.

This is the same shepherd whose Word wakes the dead and brings resurrection life into the orbit of creation. This is the same shepherd who has a claim on us, and, as our collect today says, that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads.

The beauty of God's decision to participate in the goodness of creation, and to invite us to participate in the fullness of resurrected life, is that we don't have to cast our eyes down-range to another world, after death, or to another life, as if this one is not the one that really matters. It does, and the good shepherd comes into our midst and says this is the world that matters to God.

May we have eyes to see as God sees; may we have courage and conviction to follow along those right pathways for his Name's sake.