

Sermon – “The Lord Is My Shepherd”
Sunday, April 22, 2018
Scripture Readings: Acts 4:5-12 and John 10:11-18
Trajan McGill
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading begins halfway through a situation which occurred after the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus into heaven. His disciples had healed a man, and had then been preaching the resurrection of Jesus, and this had gotten them in trouble—they had been arrested. Listen now for God’s word to you in the fourth chapter of Acts, verses five through twelve.

⁵The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” ⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.

¹¹This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’ ¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

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Our second scripture reading, from the Gospel of John, takes place chronologically before the first reading, and relates words of Jesus to his followers. Hear God’s Word in John 10, verses 11 through 18.

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The 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. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No 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.”

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One cares for what is one's own. If you own rental property or run your own business, you probably know that especially well. But all of us recognize that this is true. Ownership increases someone's stake in something and in how it is treated.

That is true when we're talking about children playing with each other's toys and when we're talking about employees making sure a job is done right and the business is maintained. That is why employee-owned businesses proudly trumpet that fact; they know that customers will expect a higher degree of responsibility from the people who work there if they have their own stake in it. That is why ministries and policies striving to revitalize neighborhoods seek to shift things from highly rental-based residential patterns toward ownership-based ones.

Habitat for Humanity is one such ministry with whom this church partners regularly (and which, by the way, is in the middle of a build we are helping sponsor right now, on S. Glenwood, and is seeking new volunteers, especially women). Habitat hopes to lift up entire neighborhoods, by not only giving people a chance to obtain stable, affordable housing, but by planting people who are rooted in a place and have an ownership stake in the outcome of the neighborhood, its properties, and its schools.

Jesus appeals to the same principle in our reading from John. "I am the good shepherd," he says. "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."¹ Whatever flock is under Jesus's care, we are to understand, should be reassured. The sheep are not creatures he is hired to babysit; they are his own.

Shepherding is a metaphor used elsewhere in scripture, also. It probably evokes for you the familiar image given to us in the beloved Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."²

I should say here, by the way, that in Psalm 23, the word "want" is being used in its older form. I suspect it is a common misunderstanding to read that line, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," and think it means something like, "The Lord is my shepherd; I will have no desires." Some may even read it and think it suggests that to want anything when the Lord is our shepherd is some kind of sin. "Thou shalt not dare want anything, hope for anything, ask for anything beyond what you already have. The Lord is your shepherd; stop your whining. The Lord is your shepherd; be quiet and be satisfied."

But that's not it at all. The word "want" as used in Psalm 23 is being used more as in the phrase, "I will not be left wanting for anything." It is not "to want" as in "to desire," but "to want" as in "to lack," or "to be missing something that you need." "The Lord is my shepherd; I

¹ John 10:11-12 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Psalm 23:1 (*NRSV*).

shall lack for nothing,” is more what it is asserting. Some Bible translations even render it more that way;³ most do not partly because that Psalm is so popular and beloved, so ingrained in our cultural legacy all the way back to the King James Bible, published in 1611, that to change the recognized wording is a bit jarring and breaks some of the cross-generational familiarity with the scripture.

It is a beloved, well-remembered Psalm for a reason. Psalm 23 speaks of being fully provided for, body and soul. The Lord “makes me lie down in green pastures,”⁴ which to a sheep is food. “Leads me beside still waters,” which to a sheep is calm and drink. “Restores my soul,” and “leads me in right paths.” It speaks of a comforting rod and staff. Why would tools of control and power comfort? Because they are employed in wisdom and protection. A sheep has no ability to match speed with a wolf, or guile with a mountain lion; it cannot go jaw-to-jaw with a bear. The sheep neither knows which path is safe, nor does it have the power to keep it so.

And it is not so far off as an apt metaphor for human beings. We sometimes entertain the much-desirable idea that we have a lot of wisdom as to the paths before us, control over the things which could intrude upon us, and the ability to fight off wolves of our own accord. But we all know that is true only within a sphere so tiny as to be infinitesimal. The paths we could take through life are infinite. They only look manageable as a set of choices because we, like sheep, are herd animals, and we only rarely consider going down paths that large numbers of others are not already on. And as for control and defense, our place in the world is small. We might not even be winning the fight against single-celled organisms, as anybody familiar with the growth of drug-resistant bacteria could tell us. The full range of threats to human health, safety, and well-being that surround us in the universe are beyond our comprehension or avoidance...and that’s before we even consider the real dangers.

For we, after all, are people of faith, who believe that dangers to the body are not the greatest dangers. The body will be lost one day regardless, and it will be remade. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” taught Jesus.⁵ The soul needs its own leading. Where are *we* headed, our true, deep *selves*? Upon what path? Upward toward light? Or downward toward darkness? Toward restoration and healing? Or toward spite and brokenness? It is not always so easy to tell. Even the path down a mountain has hills upon it, and the path upward may go downward in places to cross ditches and ravines in the journey to the highest height.

But the good shepherd knows the way, even when the sheep do not, and leads them; and the good shepherd, because the sheep are his own, will put his life in the path of the predator.

³ See, for instance, the *Common English Bible (CEV)*, *The Message*, *New English Translation (NET)*, *New International Version (NIV)*, among others.

⁴ This and all quotes from Psalm 23 from the *NRSV*.

⁵ Matthew 10:28 (*NRSV*). See also the similar Luke 12:4-5.

There is a range of metaphor for Jesus as the one in whom to put our hope and faith. The John 10 passage we just read has Jesus as a shepherd, but elsewhere in the same chapter Jesus shifts and speaks of himself as the gate through which the sheep enter for safety.⁶ Our first reading, from Acts, depicted Christ as a stone, the cornerstone, the fundamental rock anchoring and holding together the whole building. “There is salvation in no one else,” Peter says there, “for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”⁷

The metaphors vary because no one image alone can capture the degrees and ways in which Jesus is the one in whom faith can be placed and the one whose faithfulness and steadfastness is perfect and complete.

Our Wednesday evening Bible study has been discussing power for the last couple of meetings—what it is, who has it, what it is for, and how it is exercised. This week we looked at the opening two chapters of the Bible and considered where power is found there, and what kinds of power God has, and what kinds of power are given to us as human beings. It is clear God has the foundational power, the power to create from nothing, which we do not. But it is also clear that God has given human beings power, too, and here is where the lessons of shepherd-like care continue but the metaphor may reach its limit.

For unlike sheep, we have some things given into our care. We have more power over one another than sheep do. More power to care for or hurt ourselves. More power of stewardship, or as Genesis 1 puts it, “dominion,” which is pretty close to, and only just short of, actual ownership. We have more than the stake of a mere hired hand in the care for what is within our power. We have creative ownership in the flourishing of the world.⁸

And when we love as Christ loves, and emulate his life, we are meant to take that role seriously much as he does. We care for our children, for they are given into our care, and when they are young, it is our rod and staff that keep them safe and fence them in, away from the cliff. We care for our parents, eventually, when they can no longer carry their own staff. We even have care of our own bodies and minds, not in the deep ways that God has care of us, but in nevertheless important ways.

Remember that story of creation from Genesis? God gave humans dominion over the earth, and handed Adam and Eve the garden to till and tend,⁹ a kind of shepherding power specially given to human beings in our dealings with ourselves and one another that the inanimate parts of creation and the other creatures were not given.

This shepherding is a lesser form than God’s, but it is real, and a gift, an opportunity to be participants rather than merely recipients. What shall we do with it?

⁶ He actually goes back and forth between the two. John 10 begins with Jesus speaking of himself as the shepherd and gatekeeper. In verses 7-9, he changes perspectives, referring to himself as the gate itself through which the sheep enter and are saved. He then returns to the metaphor of himself as shepherd for the verses we read today.

⁷ Acts 4:11-12 (*NRSV*).

⁸ See Genesis 1:26-28.

⁹ See Genesis 2, particularly verses 4-15.

Shall we preserve the earth? We can stop and reverse rivers. We can fill the air with what we choose. We can and have ended entire species. If we take seriously the idea that we are given, as Genesis 1 says, “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth,”¹⁰ and are the tillers of the earth as told in Genesis 2, then we are made by God to be, in a sense, (small-“L”) lords over the earth itself, with a kind of ownership stake.

“He’s got the whole world in his hands,” goes the children’s Sunday School song, but in certain, important ways, within those greater hands, much of the world has been given into our hands to tend, to cultivate, develop, and look after.

Shall we do this well, honorably, and sustainably? Shall we be, like literal shepherds, protectors of the creatures, or will we betray them? It is important that we consider this, and not wave away our power over the earth as if it is not real, and as if it is not being exercised as neglect when we do not exercise it in some other fashion.

If our power over the earth is a kind of “dominion,” our power over other human beings is less so; it not as with other animals, a higher-order-to-lower-order relationship. And yet, the power is in our hands to lift up or to cut down, to protect or abandon, to encourage and lead or build barriers before our neighbors. Shall we do one, or the other? Let me quote to you from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?...As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”¹¹

What does this mean? It means we have an ownership stake in one another. And one cares for what is one’s own. The model of Christ is clear: “Love one another as I have loved you.”¹²

And as we try this, as we try our weak and imperfect hands at shepherding—our earth, our children, our neighbors, we surely know we will fail regularly, as even Jesus’s closest disciples failed one another and him.

¹⁰ Genesis 1:28 (NRSV).

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:12-13a, 14-17, and 20-21 (NRSV).

¹² John 13:34, paraphrased.

But we have this consolation and comfort: the true good shepherd remains, to lead us, and to restore us, for Jesus Christ is not a hired hand; we are his own. Through him we were created, in him we dwell, and by him we are saved. Let us have love for what is in our own hands, as he first loved that which was in his, and let us not be dissuaded by fear, of hunger nor of thirst, of enemies nor darkness nor of any evils, for the Lord is our shepherd. Amen.