

Psalm 23
Acts 4:5-12
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

The Rev. Susan B. Pinkerton
Interim Priest in Charge, St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church
Corona Del Mar, CA

The Good Shepherd

We are all familiar with the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd. He is portrayed as a kind, compassionate, gentle man with a small lamb cradled in his protective arms, surrounded by children. This bucolic scene of love and security is the one I grew up with and provided a great deal of comfort. But, this is only one aspect of Jesus in his role as the Good Shepherd. There is also the Cross.

As the Good Shepherd Jesus guards his flock from all that threatens to do harm and endanger their lives. The word in Greek for “good” is *kalos* as used in our reading from John’s gospel implies that Jesus is more than just good as his job in watching the sheep. It means he is a model shepherd; faithful and noble in all that he does to protect the well-being of his flock.¹ In the end of his earthly existence Jesus willingly gives up his life to ensure the flock’s safety and well being. So deep, limitless and uncompromising is his love for this flock, Jesus ends up on the Cross. He dies for the very ones he loves.

As a theologian once stated, “Herein lies the power and mystery of the Easter faith, that this risen Lord and faithful Shepherd has done the decisive deed in beating down sin and robbing death of its paralyzing thrall.”² During these 49 days of the Easter season this is our focus - the Resurrected Christ; the One God calls his Beloved; the Jesus who fulfills his promise to his disciples and returns from the grave so that we may all have life and live it abundantly – as God’s beloved.

This is love. A divine love made possible through the relationship between God and God’s creation. Jesus embodies the human form of this divine love. This is love incarnate. And Jesus calls us to do the same as followers of Christ and members of his flock. Of course, there are many aspects of this divine love but I highlight three that are tangible and carry with them the potential of playing a central part in our lives, bringing us ever closer to God.

First is Relationship. I find myself often saying, “It is all about relationship.” Through the liturgical cycle of our readings we listen to the Gospel stories, we read Paul’s letters to various

¹ Barbara J. Essex, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 449-450.

² F. Dean Lueking, “Shepherding,” *Christian Century*, April 9, 1997, p. 361, copyright by the Christian Century Foundation and used by permission.

struggling congregations and we learn of our Hebrew heritage with stories of the Creation, the Exodus and the ancient prophets that have gone on before us. When we distill these stories down to their essence it is about being in and out of relationship with God and each other. Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, Jacob and Esau, Jesus and his disciples. You and me and our relationship with God and each other. Love is the power that binds these relationships together. We see this in Jesus as the Good Shepherd guarding his flock – out of love and not just a sense of duty. We are called to be in relationship with God and each other and it begins with acknowledging our need to love and be loved.

This past week I was in Washington DC. I was taking the Metro, the subway system, to the airport with a bag in each hand. I approached the long escalator that takes you down to the trains. It is long and steep, about two stories down I would guess. Just as I was walking to the top of the escalator I noticed an elderly gentleman struggling to get on. In a moment he dropped his can and started to stumble. I rushed to the top of the escalator, balancing my bags while trying to grasp his arm and his cane. He was able to straighten himself up and I managed not to fall as I balanced my bags and handed him his cane as the escalator continued downward. We literally held on to each other as we continued down the escalator each balancing the other. During our way down we began to talk. He told me he was 93 and still working full time. I was amazed at his agility and we had a nice conversation about his work as a fundraiser for children's charities. In those few minutes we had established a brief relationship, relating to one another – two human beings literally holding on to each other, a wonderful metaphor for our need to be in relationship.

Second is Listening. The sheep know their shepherd's voice. They listen for it and respond to it when called. Do we listen for God's voice? Do we respond when we hear it? Listening seems to have become a lost art in our modern secular society. Go into any shopping mall and we are lambasted with loud music and noise coming from all directions. Quiet spaces are not of much value – they are quickly filled up with noise from our modern culture. To hear God we must first listen – to be still and wait with anticipation. For me it is much like going to the symphony or musical performance, where you wait in silent anticipation for the playing of that first melodious note. I think listening for God is much the same. Whether it is sitting alone in silence, during worship service or watching a magnificent sunset, we are called to be still and listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us to him.

Third is Interconnection. Each living person on this planet is interrelated by virtue of our shared humanness. This interconnection is not diminished with the myriad of cultures, languages, races, or religion that make up our global village. We are all made in God's image and share this common heritage. We are of the same flock. Therefore, we are truly sisters and brothers, whether we speak the same language or even know of each other's culture.

Thomas Long, preacher and writer, tells the story about a man, Paul Gruninger, who lived in a small town in Austria during WWI and afterwards.³ He as a mid-level police official married to a teacher living a simple, predictable life. There was nothing unusual or dramatic about his life. However, until 1939 when he was arrested for altering documents that allowed Jews to cross the border from Austria to Switzerland. He died a poor man at the age of 72,

³ Thomas G. Long, "Faith Matters - Small Acts of Courage," *Christian Century*, May 2, 2012, Vol. 129, No. 9, 47.

having been banished as a criminal. Years later at his funeral a rabbi quoted the Talmud, “He who saves a single life, saves the entire world.” This simple, unassuming public servant felt this interconnection with other human beings who were total strangers and empowered him to risk his life to save others.

Being in relationship, listening for God and acknowledging our interconnection are three tangible ways we can embody the divine love that binds Jesus to his flock as the Good Shepherd. How will you manifest God’s love in your life today?

Amen.