

Earth Day/Good Shepherd Sunday Easter 4 Year B, 2024

Psalm 23, John 10: 11-18

We Are the Good Shepherd's for Our Home Earth

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. The 23rd Psalm along with Jesus' words in John's gospel—"I am the good shepherd"—explain why. It is also Earth Day Sunday, in recognition of Earth Day, a celebration which started in 1970, always on April 22nd, which is tomorrow. It is a celebration of our home Earth and of the things we are doing to protect the environment and heal creation. This morning we will explore the connection between our call to be good shepherds and our call to celebrate and care for our home Earth.

I listened to a sermon by Will Willimon on the 23rd Psalm this week. Willimon is a Methodist minister and also a renowned preacher. He began his sermon by talking about preaching in general, and he cited a survey which asked people who attend church on Sunday mornings what they wanted most from a sermon. The number one response was "I want to hear sermons with ideas and actions that I can use in my daily life." People want their preachers to provide specifics about what they can do to become better Christians. Willimon didn't seem too pleased with this response and the challenge—and the burden—it puts on the preacher. He said it was as if people needed to come to church with a notebook and pen to take notes to remember their assignment, as if the preacher is the great teacher, the do-gooder, the CEO at a board meeting telling his employees "now go out there and do what I say." I've learned that there is a lot more to preaching than that. Perhaps the greatest role of the preacher is to somehow help the listeners to know that God is present and active in all the events of their lives, and further that we can rely upon that Presence to guide us along the journeys we take, through the good and the bad events that we will all encounter. This is perhaps especially appropriate for this Sunday Earth Day, when we celebrate our home Earth, because as we will see God the source of

creation is most definitely present and active within every created thing. The extension of this truth is that our home Earth is sacred ground.

The Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation is an ecumenical group that provides programs focused on contemplative prayer and action. The foundation of their understanding of God is that God is present; God is active; and God is good. The 23rd Psalm, which you have heard hundreds of times, gets at that, at this understanding of God being present and active and good in our lives. It is a song of comfort and hope. Scholars say that the psalmist was using sheep as a metaphor for Israel as a community wandering in exodus to the promised land, to give them the certainty that God the shepherd would care for them and provide for them, and ultimately bring them home in safety to dwell in God's house forever. The same message applies to all of us as individuals and as community today. God is the shepherd. We are the sheep. And what a wonderful message it is. One of my fellow students in seminary said the 23rd Psalm is the "Swiss army knife" of pastoral care. We use it in our pastoral visits in homes and hospitals, and of course we hear it often at funerals. It is a gift.

Enter Jesus, who was surely familiar with the psalm in his day. God the always present shepherd provided the same comfort for him that Jesus provides for his followers in the Gospel of John. In one of his "I am" statements typical of John, Jesus says "I am the good shepherd." He also warns about the hired hand, who does not care about the sheep, who will run away and abandon the sheep in the face of danger, leaving them to be devoured by the wolves lurking around them. The hired hand is self-absorbed, looking out only for himself, and the consequences are deadly. If we go further into John's gospel, to the resurrection appearance on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, we find Jesus talking to Peter. Jesus asks him not one time but three times, "Simon, do you love me?" "You know that I love you," says Peter. I can just see Peter, hurt and humiliated as Jesus keeps after him. After three times Jesus finally lets him off the hook. And what does Jesus say? "Feed my sheep." He is calling Peter and the others,

and all of us, to be good shepherds. This shifts our understanding of who we are in these stories about the shepherd and the sheep. Yes, we are the sheep, often lost and wandering and in need of guidance and protection, and of knowing that God is with us. But we like Peter are also called to be the good shepherd.

Where in our lives today can we be the kind of shepherd Jesus is talking about, to provide this kind of presence and care? There are so many places, but appropriate for today Earth Day I think the dominant need is with our care for our home Earth. Our beautiful blue planet was first revealed to us in a stunning, eye-opening way when we saw from afar our beautiful home in the photograph called “Earthrise” taken from the Moon’s surface by astronaut William Anders during the Apollo 8 mission in 1968. It has been called “the most influential environmental photograph ever taken.” You probably remember it. It shows not only the beauty of Earth, but also reveals just how fragile it is, and how vulnerable, floating out there in the vastness of space. It is indeed our beautiful but also fragile home. And we have abused it. I could go on about the many consequences of this abuse, mostly occurring since the beginning of the industrial age: air and water pollution, deforestation, degradation of the soil, melting polar ice and rising sea levels, increasing intensity of storms and fires, extinction of thousands of species, huge piles of plastic the size of Texas sitting at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. The list goes on. I could spend time castigating our government and ourselves for how slow we have been to comprehend what is happening, and how little we have done as yet to mend our ways and heal the planet. But I am not here to make you or myself feel guilty, though God knows we are all complicit and guilty on some level. Rather, I am here to give us hope, because without hope we will be able to do nothing, heal nothing, and without hope this beautiful home of ours will never become what God intends for it to be. We are one with the earth. We are made of the earth, a part of it just as are all created things. Humans like all of life are literally made of the same elements that found their way here from exploding stars billions of

years ago. We are made from its dust and we will return to its dust. And God is present within all of it. It is sacred ground. We are called to be its stewards and care for it, and to love it as God loves it. In the words of Jesus we are called to be its “good shepherds.”

So what do we do? You know the specifics of actions we can take. Things like recycle, reuse, reduce—all the many ways we can help turn this devastation around. Simplify our lives. But I think the more basic foundational thing we can do is spiritual. It is a the spirituality that recognizes God’s presence within all created things. Our best understanding today is that God emptied God’s self into creation almost fourteen billion years ago, and continues this self-emptying in this never-ending evolutionary process we call life. As Christians we call this God the Christ, as we read in the prologue of John “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life.” Powerful! If we see all of creation this way, including our home Earth and everything in it, then we will be its good shepherds. We will know it and we will love it just as Jesus told his disciples. Unlike the self-absorbed hired hand who seeks only profit, monetary gain, and power, we will care for it, guide it, and lead it to new life. That is our calling today, this Good Shepherd Sunday and Earth Day, and in the days ahead. That is our hope.

So if you are one of those looking for a “things to do” list once you leave church today, let me give you some suggestions. Go outside and open your senses to the creation around you. Look at the gorgeous display of flowers. Smell them. Look at those trees so alive and watch their branches and leaves moving with the wind. Feel the breeze on your skin. Listen to the songs of the birds. Watch the children at play, so completely in the moment. Go out at night at marvel at the moon and the stars ablaze in the sky. Watch the sun setting below the horizon. But most of all—within all of this beauty—see if you can get a sense of God being present in all of it, a sense that you are walking on sacred

ground. Then you will have stepped onto the path leading to its good care, to its return to health, to its new life.