

Sermon Easter 4 Year C, 2025 All Saints; Good Shepherd Sunday  
Gospel John 10: 22-30; Psalm 23

**The 23rd Psalm: The With-God Journey through Life**

*In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen*

Hello all, and welcome to this the fourth Sunday of Easter. Eastertide is the time—the 50 days—between Easter and Pentecost, and we are about half way there. And today is also Mother’s Day. So for all of the mothers here: Happy Mother’s Day! Today is also Good Shepherd Sunday. I was looking through some of the sermons I’ve given over the past (now) 5 years since I’ve been here with you at All Saints, and came across the sermon I gave last year on Good Shepherd Sunday. We had a special liturgy that day to celebrate Earth Day, much as we did here two weeks ago, and the focus of the sermon was that we are called to be shepherds who care for our planet Earth. The Psalm last year was the 23rd Psalm, just as it is today. The theme that runs through our readings today is the shepherd who takes care of the sheep. We see this shepherd in the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd.” We see it in the New Testament reading from the book of Revelation, “for the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.” And we see it throughout the tenth chapter of John’s gospel, where Jesus says “I am the good shepherd...” Why do we add the adjective “good” to shepherd? Shepherd is usually used in scripture as a metaphor for “king,” and there are many places in the Old Testament—the Jewish Bible—where the shepherds—the kings—of the nation Israel have not been good. We see that in Jeremiah, and in a lengthy diatribe about shepherds in chapter 24 of Ezekiel: “prophesy against the Shepherd of Israel...say to them...says the Lord God ‘you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.’” (Ezekiel 34: 2-3) So, in contrast to these failed shepherds of times past, Jesus is the “good” shepherd. Thus, our celebration today!

John uses the imagery of the shepherd and the sheep throughout his gospel, six times in chapter ten, including one of his seven “I am” statements we see in John, “I am the good shepherd.” And he does it again, at the end of the gospel, in the epilogue in chapter 21 that we read last week. That is the resurrection appearance of Jesus on the beach of the Sea of Tiberias, when he tells his disciples where to cast the net to catch fish after they had spent the entire night without catching a single one, and then has a breakfast of fish and bread with them. And poor Peter! Later in that scene Jesus asks him three times if he loves him. Embarrassed and humiliated—for Peter had three times denied even knowing Jesus on the night before the crucifixion—Peter tells Jesus “Lord you know that I love you.” Jesus replies “Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep.” So we see this imagery and metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep throughout scripture. What is it telling us?

The book of Psalms is an anthology—a collection—of hymns from ancient Israel written around 3000 years ago. They have a universal message, largely concerned with the human condition, with individuals or communities who are ill or feel threatened or persecuted; or on the other hand are happy, grateful, and trusting. There are 150 psalms. The 23rd is a hymn of trust—again “the Lord is my shepherd”—trust that God will provide, regardless of the situation. It is also a psalm of praise and thanksgiving. Next to the Lord’s Prayer it is probably the most frequently read and best known passage in the entire Bible. It is with some hesitation that I preach on the 23rd Psalm. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has said that it is so familiar to everyone that it is almost presumptuous to preach on it, that it preaches itself. Yet one of my good friends recently said he finds something new in it every time he reads it. I like to think of it as a journey through life, because in it are good times and bad, green pastures, streams of cool water, rest, the trials of dark valleys, being fed and living on, even in the face of our enemies, and ending with confidence and faith that we will return home, our true home in that one place that we are really “at home,” that being

our home in God. This psalm expresses our understanding and faith in the God of goodness and mercy through all the events in our lives.

We are likely all familiar with those green pastures, still waters, dark valleys, rest—metaphors for places and events in our own lives. The psalmist's use of the language is beautiful. I'm sure the 23rd Psalm conjures up some memories for you, memories probably some good but possibly also some bad, times of happiness and of sadness, of rest and of trial. We hear it most frequently at funerals and memorials, and so it is often associated with death. It certainly provides comfort then too, but it is more than that. It is a psalm for the here and now, in our everyday lives. It is about the **present**, not so much about the future. Listen to the verbs, almost all present tense: "the Lord **is** my shepherd, who **leads** and **restores**; I **fear** no evil; your rod and staff **comfort**; you **prepare** and **anoint**. Only verse 6 has implications for the future: shall follow, shall dwell. The Psalm is about our lives now in the presence of God, in the presence of the Good Shepherd, both in the good and bad times. And there is another thing that is different about the 23rd Psalm, noted by James Luther Mays in his "Preaching and Teaching the Psalms." It is the uniquely personal nature of the relationship which the text describes. Says Mays, "No other psalm says, 'My shepherd.' In all other psalms where shepherd is used as a metaphor for the deity, the relationship is to the community...it is always 'our shepherd.' What is going on in Psalm 23 is the location and assurance of God's relation to God's (sic) people in the living of one individual person"—"my shepherd." Listen again to a few of the lines from this beautiful poem, and notice that it is poetry: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul...Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil, for you are with me." The psalmist is talking about moments when it was as if God had led him into green pastures. When he did indeed walk through the valley of the shadow of death, there was a sense of the presence of God, nonetheless, that kept him

from being afraid. This psalm, like many of the psalms, is asking us to notice those moments in our own lives. Think about such moments. Did you have a sense of God being present in them?

Yes, the psalm is both present tense and personal. It is not about “what everyone can hope for.” It is more about “What are you and God up to these days?” Where and how do you see God present and active in your day to day lives today? What is God doing in your lives now?—not what you hope for at some time in the future—but here and now.

And now back to the shepherd imagery, and what it means for us. The psalmist is saying that the only good shepherd for the Israelite nation is God, for us as Christians the Christ Jesus. It is ultimately from God our shepherd that we receive life: this life-giving beautiful home Earth, air to breathe, water and food, rest, shelter, protection, and a home: “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” It reminds me of the collect: “Take us to a place apart where we might find again our true heart’s center, our far horizon, the silence that awaits a world where we can breathe, through the Christ Jesus, who brings us near to you.”

The psalm is our life story, and it provides hope for our journeys through life. It includes trials, but it has a happy ending. The question for us is: can we today really trust with such confidence this way? This kind of faith is easy when everything is going well, but perhaps not so easy when it is not, when we face hardship and suffering, when as Psalm 69 says “the waters have come up to my neck...and the flood sweeps over me;” when in the words of Simon and Garfunkel we need a “bridge over troubled waters”? What are the dark valleys in your life? Who and what are the enemies that surround you at the table of your life? Think of them. We all have them: times of crisis, times when we need help—fear of the violence that surrounds us, fear of what lurks beyond the chaos we have experienced in these last few months in our country and the world, fear for our home Earth that sustains us, and that the planet we will be leaving our

children and grandchildren is not sustainable—enemies that keep coming back to the table? And on the other hand where do you experience the stillness and rest that this psalm claims God will provide? Think about that: where and what is it that restores your soul? Being in community, being outdoors in nature, being an active advocate for the marginalized among us, serving, being creative as in cooking or gardening or writing, learning, dancing, loving? Being present in this parish, with these people? Is this church a green pasture and still water for you? Psalm 23 is an invitation, an offer of help on our journey through life. It can be that “bridge over troubled waters” that Simon and Garfunkel sing about. It is a great text for living a life with God. It recognizes that we like sheep need a Shepherd to guide us, to provide for us, perhaps especially when we like sheep roam off from the herd, and lose our connection to our community, and to the Christ our shepherd.

And one more thing before I close: What we see in the epilogue to John, in chapter 21 where Jesus challenges Peter, is a call to “feed my sheep.” It is a call for all of us to be the shepherds who love and care for one another and our neighbors, and to care for and protect creation, or put in another way, to be the Christ in the world today.

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