

E Pluribus Unum?

Good Shepherd Sunday, April 21, 2024

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

The promise of the Good Shepherd is offered to all who listen to his voice, so that all may come in and go out and find pasture.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

Many of us have heard these words since we were children. My parents plopped a Bible in my lap and told me to try and turn to the middle of the Book. I take it as a sign of God’s providence that I eventually found my way to Psalm 23. Imagine how confused I would have been if I had landed on Isaiah 20:3 which says, “My servant Isaiah has been going around naked and barefoot for three years.”

Instead, probably with their help, I learned these words. It still humbles me when I stand before a congregation at a funeral watch as their lips move silently with me as I read Psalm 23: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters.”

These words loom large in our lives. They offer us comfort when death enters our lives, or when the torrents of grief inundate us. Death remains, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, the last enemy to be destroyed, and at times it feel as if it is stalking us and those we love.

It is in those moments that we most often hear the words of the 23rd Psalm. They have become for us a shout to God, a cry to the only superhero we know and trust. God can be trusted, so even in those moments when we are dragging our feet through the canyons of fear and dark dare to say, “I shall not want.”

They are more than a shout out to a superhero, however. Early Christians began to understand this as they remembered that Jesus had said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” John chapter 10 contains multiple references to sheep. Sheep are stereotyped as being docile imbeciles whose behaviors place them at risk. Yet the opposite is true. Sheep have been domesticated for centuries. They are sources of food and textiles.

Scientists show that they are intelligent, and cognitively complex species who demonstrate both significant individuality and complex social structures.

Sheep are guided into a pasture, into a community. It is a community where God's protection can be known. It is a place where the Good—the true, noble, faithful – shepherd lives. Within the community of God's pasture we are nourished, protected, and held secure.

It's not surprising that Bible speaks of sheep often – not as mindless followers, but as lambs who are valued by God. Sheep were a prominent part of the life of God's people, and so many of Israel's leaders were shepherds –Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Aaron and others. Indeed, there are more than 500 references to sheep in the Old Testament, and most of these refer to actual sheep. In the New Testament, the images become metaphors primarily for the relationship between Jesus and God. Sheep place their trust in the Shepherd, who vouchsafes for them with the promise of his own life. Such trust is a way that must be walked, says James Limburg, a way through life where harm and evil exist and enemies persist. "Trust is not a rosy, romantic, optimistic view of things," he writes, "It's foundations are prayer and thanksgiving and the story of salvation."

The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is our good shepherd, the source of abundant life. It is Jesus who tells us, "I am the Good Shepherd." I am the true, and most trustworthy shepherd—not the hired hands who will forsake the sheep or clock out when their shift is done. I am no comic book hero who swoops in at the last minute to save the innocent from the clutches of the evil villain.

Instead, to place our trust in the Good Shepherd is to discover the blessing God intends for our rather ordinary lives that are always a mix of ups and downs. To offer our trust, to say together, "I do not lack," is to remind ourselves that we do not dwell in lands of anxious scarcity, wondering how we will get along.

It is instead a prayer which trusts that as we dwell in the mutual love of God and Jesus, we will not be abandoned. God, our shepherd, does not abandon or leave us. In fact, as Jesus makes clear, the Good Shepherd is the one who is always searching for the sheep, always yearning to be in relationship with them. It is the Good Shepherd who guides us throughout our journeys, refreshing our parched lips and providing for our hungering spirits. All of it expresses our confidence in God. "I shall not want."

This is the voice we long for: the voice of the shepherd who offers us abundance. He is the one who sees the wolf advancing and does not run away. He is the one who lays down his life. He is the One voice who dwells in unity with God. The words are loving, lush, full of promise and hope.

These are the words you carry with you in life's most bitter and tenuous moments: the moment when life support is withdrawn, the moment when the stack of bills is higher than the stacks of cash; the moments when we are betrayed, or hurt.

The Lord is our Shepherd.

Jesus makes it clear that something else is true. He inserts a reminder in chapter 10, verse 16 that challenges us. Jesus tells them "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." It is a sort of intimate way of knowing – a way of knowing that rushes across us and affirms our identity as those beloved by God. That is what we trust to be true.

And it is true, says Jesus, not only for us, but for others. Others who are not "of" our flock. Others who may not look like us, or act like us. Others who may make us uncomfortable with the way they think or act. I have others, says Jesus, and I must bring them also.

Unity in diversity is something we aspire to achieve, and even print it on our currency. Yet in practice the idea of "e pluribus unum" can be unsettling. In practice, becoming one out of many means acknowledging and valuing others.

Others like cancer patients whose diagnoses make us uncomfortable.

Others like elderly persons who are lonely and needing someone to hear their stories.

Others like the group of people I sat with the other day who have largely walked away from the institutional church – good, loving people who yearn for the same things we yearn for – peace, and happiness, the abundance of life – but who in one way or another have been told by the church that they are "others" and that "others" are not appreciated or wanted or needed.

Jesus said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." E pluribus, unum...out of many, one.

That is indeed a challenge. Decades ago, I was taken to task at a Session meeting by an elder who told me that she didn't appreciate the glitter the youth group had spread on the staircase that came from the second story. The kids had run through the church after youth group. The glitter on the projects we had made flew behind them like the contrails of fighter jets. The glitter was everywhere. Later, the custodian showed me ten commandments of youth ministry: thou shall not use glitter.

As she was speaking, I tried to come up with an apology. Another elder looked at me and said to the woman, "You know, maybe we should be thankful that we have a church where kids in our neighborhood show up and spread glitter."

Some of you will remember how the Rev. Lee Nichols, who was the founding pastor of Woodlawn Chapel, would begin worship each week. I'm told he would say something along the lines of "Whoever you are. Wherever you are from Whatever you are or are not. You are welcome here." As one member told me recently, "I still remember feeling drenched in the warmth of hope, possibilities and opportunities for my family to grow in Christ."

Our world is challenged by the notions of "others." We are even frightened by those who are others: immigrants, or people whose religious beliefs differ from us, or whose orientations and family life is different. We may even question whether or not "e pluribus unum" remains as valid today as it was for Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.

Jesus sees it differently, and he calls us to see it differently as well: there are other sheep, not in this fold, but who are still in one flock, one shepherd. Amen. a

But if that is true, then what do we make of Jesus' words in John 10:16. As he is describing the life of the Good Shepherd, Jesus boldly announces, "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."

Jesus' teaching on the Good Shepherd. Amen