

Being Good Shepherds
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2022
Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park
The Rev. Chase Danford, Rector

Jesus said, ‘My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.’”

Let’s see...opening hymn: “The King of Love, My Shepherd Is.” The Psalm: 23, “The Lord is My Shepherd.” Gradual hymn: “Saviour, like a shepherd lead us.” And the gospel: “My sheep hear my voice.” Hmm...seems like a theme, huh? Don’t worry, there’s more to come. Our music today features Good Shepherd Sunday’s greatest hits. Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, and for those who have been around the lectionary block a few times, you might know that every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we hear about Jesus the Good Shepherd, who calls us each by name. Now, you might be wondering why we always observe Good Shepherd Sunday three weeks after Easter Day. Well, I was actually wondering that myself, and I did some quick research, and I didn’t turn up much. But I did learn that before the liturgical reforms of the 60’s and 70’s, Good Shepherd Sunday actually fell on the Third Sunday of Easter. So, whether it’s the third or fourth Sunday may not be particularly significant, but I think what is interesting is that this day always falls in Eastertide, after hearing stories of Jesus’ resurrection. If the Resurrection shows us that life, light, and love will ultimately triumph, Jesus the Good Shepherd leads us beside those still waters of salvation and along God’s right pathways.

[At the 10 o’clock service] You might have noticed that Psalm 23 sounded a little different today. The choir led us in a version of the psalm dedicated to the composer’s mother, with the language for the divine changed to feminine forms. I think this is a wonderful way to observe Mother’s Day. Indeed, even though we in the Church pray frequently to God Our Father, many of us know unconditional love first through our mothers. If we take a look at both the traditional language of the psalm and this contemporary version, in both the psalmist prays that “surely

[God's] goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life." In our usual English translations, this sounds very comforting. God will provide for us. All will be green pastures and still waters in God's mercy and goodness. But it's worth looking at the Hebrew. What is translated as "follow" has the connotation of pursuit. Surely goodness and mercy will pursue me, run after me, hunt me down, even persecute me. That changes our reading a little bit, doesn't it? The psalm remains very comforting overall, but this enhances the contrasts. The valley of the shadow of death vs. God's rod and staff that manifest the presence of the divine always, the table at which we sit across from our enemies vs the oil of anointing (which symbolizes being chosen as a monarch), and now this final line being pursued by goodness vs. dwelling with God forever.

Reading the psalm in the light of the Resurrection shows us that we have to go through Good Friday to get to Easter. We must walk through the valley of the shadow of death to experience God's abundant life, to trust that God is with us always. To truly experience victory, to have our heads anointed with oil in the language of the psalm, we must confront opposition. Maybe these enemies are people or maybe they're structural forces like poverty and racism. And to dwell in God's house, we must pursue goodness and mercy. Wait, no, that's not right! We must be *pursued* by goodness and mercy. We cannot earn God's favor, we can't earn admission to God's house because God has already invited us. You see, God's goodness and mercy are always in pursuit of us. The invitation to dwell in God's house is always waiting for us. The door is always open. But what I appreciate about the full implications of goodness and mercy following us is that it's not necessarily an easy path. Because we know that. We know it's not always easy to walk the path of goodness and mercy. And yet God is pursuing us, trying to keep us on the right paths.

In some Christian circles, Good Shepherd Sunday is a day of prayer for vocations. Vocation in this sense is often understood to be ordained ministry or monastic life. But God has a calling for each and every one of us. Vocation is not just about what

we do for an occupation. Vocation is about how we are called to serve God and one another in every minute of our lives. Pope Francis wrote this week that¹

...each of us is a creature willed and loved by God; each of us has a unique and special place in the mind of God. At every moment of our lives, we are called to foster this divine spark, present in the heart of every [person], and thus contribute to the growth of a humanity inspired by love and mutual acceptance. We are called to be guardians of one another, to strengthen the bonds of harmony and sharing, and to heal the wounds of creation lest its beauty be destroyed. In a word, we are called to become a single family in the marvelous common home of creation, in the reconciled diversity of its elements.

Each of us has an individual vocation, and we also have a vocation as a community. What is our calling?

Perhaps we could look for inspiration in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. A disciple named Tabitha was devoted to good works and charity. She was close to the widows in her community, and it's implied that she gave them gifts of clothing. Widows were on the margins of Israelite society, as there was no mechanism in place for these women to sustain themselves after the deaths of their husbands. They had to rely on charity. Tabitha was apparently generous with her gifts, as the widows later seem very proud of the tunics and clothing. Tabitha died (or as some have argued, she seemed to have died), and her friends mourned for her. Peter was called to come, and he prayed over her. Then Tabitha got up, opened her eyes, and lived.

Where do you see yourself in this story? Perhaps some of us are Tabitha, perhaps some Peter, and others members of the community that loves Tabitha. We're probably all of these figures at some point in our lives, but who speaks to you today? That might be a clue to your vocation at this moment. But there is a unifying thread. All the characters in this story serve as conduits of resurrection. Tabitha gives life to the widows by recognizing their full humanity after society

¹ <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/44626>

has cast them aside. Tabitha's community refuses to give up on her. And Peter believes the impossible and prays for a life restored. Just as Tabitha had renewed the lives of many through her charity and friendship, so too was her life restored. They all served as Good Shepherds for one another, pointing the way from the event of the Resurrection of Jesus to living new lives as individuals and as a community.

May we too be Good Shepherds for one another and our community.

Amen.