

“The Shepherd and Guardian of Your Souls”

1 Peter 2:19-25

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Easter IV

If we were in our sanctuary this morning, you all could turn your heads to the right – or behind you, if you sit over in the section where Sheren and Tammy and Steve like to hang out – and see our magnificent stained glass window depicting Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep, or the Good Shepherd. The window is based on a similar painting by a 19th-century German painter named Bernhard Plockhorst. You can find that painting online; honestly, I like our stained glass window version better. And since you can't see it with your own eyes from inside our sanctuary right at the minute, well, you are always welcome to drive or walk by the east side of the church, and admire the window from the outside.

The window, and the painting, are based on several passages from our scriptures. You heard a couple of those this morning, but there are others as well. In the story about the wise men, there is a quote from the prophet Micah, which talks about a “ruler” from Bethlehem who is to “shepherd” God’s people. (Matthew 2:6) When a great crowd gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee to listen to Jesus, Jesus “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” (Matthew 9:36; Mark 6:34) Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep, in which a shepherd leaves ninety-nine of his sheep on the mountains to go in search of one sheep who went astray. (Matthew 18:12-14) Near the end of his ministry Jesus told his followers that in the fullness of time, when the Son of Man comes in his glory, “all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” (Matthew 25:32) On the night of Jesus’ arrest, Jesus quotes a prophecy from Zechariah: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” (Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27) In the gospel of John, the first 18 verses of chapter 10 are devoted to Jesus describing himself as the Good Shepherd; you heard about half of that a few minutes ago. The book of Hebrews also calls Jesus “the great shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:10). 1 Peter refers to Jesus as “the shepherd and guardian of your souls,” in the passage I read earlier (1 Peter 2:25); and, a few chapters later, Peter calls Jesus “the chief shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4). In a vision in the book of Revelation, an elder describes Jesus as “the Lamb” who is also the “shepherd” for Christians who have come out of “the great ordeal,” “guiding them to springs of the water of life.” (Revelation 7:17) Then, finally, there is the familiar line from the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1), which we Christians understand as a reference to Jesus.

So there is not just *one* reference to Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep, or the Good Shepherd, not just *two*, not even *three*, but quite a number, spread out across three of the gospels, two letters, the Book of Revelation, and also the book of Psalms. It’s a pretty pervasive, and very consistent, image of Jesus, across the pages of our scriptures. It’s also one that has inspired quite a bit of art over the course

of many centuries. Indeed, the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd is very prominent in the earliest Christian artwork we possess, in Roman catacombs where wealthy Christians were buried in the first few centuries of the church's existence. Those catacombs contain symbolic images, like a fish, or an anchor – not a cross; Christians didn't use the cross as a symbol until the fourth century. The most common image found in those early Christian tombs is a pastoral depiction of a beardless youth with some sheep – a symbol, a metaphor, for Jesus as the Good Shepherd, faithfully tending to the needs of his flock, even in death. I find it interesting that the early Christians gravitated to that particular image, that specific metaphor. It indicates just how important these passages about Jesus as the Good Shepherd were to them – how much *comfort* they derived from them. There's nothing quite like knowing that, in life and in death, there is Someone who is *always* looking out for us, Someone who will always come in search of us, Someone who will always defend us from the wolves – literal or metaphorical – that would do us harm, Someone who will always guide us to the springs of the water of life ... Someone who will even carry us through the ravages of a pandemic, and a global recession.

The passage we heard from John's gospel talks about a sheepfold – an area that is designed to be *safe* for the sheep. A place where they can graze freely, without fear of harm. The trouble is, there are also "thieves" and "bandits" who like to force their way into the sheepfold, despite the fact that they don't belong there, and aren't welcome there. "The thief," says Jesus, "comes only to steal and kill and destroy." There are forces in this universe that do not desire good for us. They want to take things from us, they want to hurt us, sometimes they literally want us to die. But we have a Good Shepherd, who tends the flock, who guards the sheepfold, who can lead us safely out of danger, into a place of safety once again. We all know who this Shepherd is; we're all here, participating in this worship service, listening to this sermon, because we want to listen to the voice of that Shepherd. "The sheep follow him," Jesus says, "because they know his voice." When there's danger, when there's fear, there is *Someone* whose voice we need to listen to, a Shepherd who will lead us to safe pasture. Those who listen to his voice "will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" – he will lead them to a safe place in which they can graze *without* fear. The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy – but *Jesus* came to give us life. That is his will, his desire, for us – to lead us to a place of both *safety* and *life*.

Sometimes, though, we have to go through painful periods. Times when – even when we are listening to the voice of the Shepherd – things still aren't going very easily or very well for us. There are times when we suffer. Times when we're doing all the right things, and life *still* hurts. Sometimes, that suffering feels unfair, unjust. This is the issue that Peter is speaking to. "It is a credit to you," he says, "if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly." Bad things are happening to you, and you're keeping hold of your faith in God. You're not giving up hope, not doubting the goodness of God. Things are rough, but your faith remains intact. It's a *credit* to you, if you can endure suffering like that, Peter says; it's *commendable*. The world should sit up and take notice. "Hey! This Christian's suffering! And he – or she – *still* trusts in God!" If life is hurting because you did something to *make* it hurt – well, that doesn't do you any credit. But "if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God." *God* is noticing your good works, your suffering, and your patient endurance. *God* is nodding his head and smiling – not that he's taking delight in your suffering, I'm not saying that – but *God* is noticing that *you're holding on to your faith while you are under tremendous pain or stress*. Not everyone can do that. It's to your credit if you can.

It is, after all, what Jesus himself did. "Christ also suffered for you," Peter says, "leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps." Remember all the good things Jesus did? Remember

how sinless his life was? And look what happened to him. Betrayed, beaten, stripped, mocked, nailed to a cross, killed. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was in his mouth,” Peter says, quoting a prophecy about Jesus from Isaiah 53. “When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.” He knew that *God* would redeem him. His suffering was not pleasant, not easy, not something that *any* of us want to go through, but he knew that it was for a purpose: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” His suffering had a purpose, a *redemptive* purpose; it was brutal for him, but it was *life-giving* for us. It changed our lives dramatically, *to the core*. What we gained from his suffering was immense – forgiveness, redemption, restoration of our right relationship with God. Jesus suffered for a *purpose*.

And one of those purposes – so Peter tells us – was to serve as an example for us. When we go through periods of unjust suffering, there is a *model* for us to follow. There is someone who has been through what we are going through – *or worse*. “When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten.” When we go through suffering, what do we do? What kind of an *attitude* do we have? Do we want to strike back in retaliation? Do we make others suffer along with us? Do we say mean and hurtful things to other people? Do we spend a lot of energy *complaining*?

There’s a model for us to follow. A model of how we can endure undeserved suffering, when it comes our way. Granted, Jesus was both fully human *and fully divine*, while we are mere mortals ... *except* ... except for the fact that the Spirit of Jesus lives in each of us. That Pentecost Spirit, that *enlivening* of our lives that comes because we bear the mark of Christ, because we have died and risen with him in the waters of baptism, because the Holy Spirit of God has implanted itself in our very own hearts ... this gives us something that the average person out there doesn’t have, a *power* and a *strength* that the average person out there doesn’t have. It gives us access to the *very Spirit of God* – the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus in his own baptism. We may not be fully divine – but we are *fully God’s*. Not “gods,” g-o-d-s, but *God’s* – capital G-o-d-*apostrophe*-s. We *belong* to God. We are one of his precious, beloved sheep, one of the little ones that Jesus would go in search of if and when we wander astray, one of the ones whom Jesus gave his life to save. *We’ve got something special*, a special sort of protection, a special sort of Shepherd, who will lead us to safe pasture, if we can but listen to his voice. He calls to us, in the midst of our suffering. The question is, *are we ready and willing to listen*?

That doesn’t mean the suffering is just going to instantaneously disappear when we listen to the voice of the Shepherd. We may have to wait a while. Maybe a *long* while. Some people may have to wait till the next life, before they are free from their undeserved suffering. Just like ... just like Jesus.

“You were going astray like sheep,” Peter says. We’ve all gone astray at times. “But now,” he says, “*now* you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” When we listen to the voice of the Shepherd, we return to the guardian of our souls, who can help get us through *anything*.

I think my favorite part of the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd is Jesus carrying a sheep on his shoulders. We’ve all been that sheep, at some point, haven’t we? Needing a little extra care, a little extra protection, a little extra *love*? Needing someone to carry us, for just a little while?

If you’re suffering ... if your life is painful, either a little bit or a lot ... listen to the voice of the Shepherd. Let him pick you up and carry you. Let him lead you to a safe pasture, where you can *live*.

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