

John 10:11-18 ~ Psalm 23 ~ 1 John 3:16-24

The Good Shepherd

4th Sunday of Easter ~ Earth Day Sunday ~ April 25, 2021

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“I am the good shepherd.” Jesus busted out this name, this root metaphor for God to deescalate the conflict that had just erupted over his healing of the man born blind from birth on the sabbath day. The Pharisees and everyone in the seething, swirling crowd who were on the scene understood God as shepherd. But Jesus was bringing this vision into real time reality. We are told that the Pharisees, not knowing what to do with this man who could now see for the first time in his life, “they drove him out.” (John 9:34b). They were divided and confused over this unexplainable, disruptive event. The healed man said to them, “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.” (John 9:32) Arguing had broken out. There were confused, disoriented, perhaps even terrified. This had never happened before. Certainly not on their watch or in their town.

After the year we’ve all been through, I think this Eastertide of 2021, we can relate more readily than before to the Pharisees’ confusion, fear, and disorientation. What is happening here? Feeling like things are the same, yet different all at the same time. Kind of like us right here today in church. It is great to be together on a Sunday, worshipping God in our holy sanctuary. That is familiar. Yet there are only a few of us, sitting at a distance from each other, wearing masks, not singing, not passing the peace or the offering plate. Doing our best to be safe. Employing practices that we understand will prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Some of us agree with the steps and precautions we are taking. Some of us do not. We may look around and wonder, or we may be worshipping from home, now for over a year wondering: Is this church or not? The Good Shepherd says, “Yes it is, because I am here.”

I think we can also relate in a new way, to the man driven out from his community. Over a year ago, we have been driven out of the church. No longer free to simply go to church, like we have our whole lives. But this is not the only important, meaningful, and lifegiving place or activity we have been driven out of. We have also been driven out of schools and restaurants, stadiums, and auditoriums. Some of us have been driven out of careers or career paths, courses of study that we thought would be ours forever. Many relationships are being driven to the breaking point. COVID has also spiked an epidemic of loneliness, for which there is no vaccine. The longing to know and be known, trusted and cherished by others, isolation in spite of the myriad of social media platforms to connect us with one another. To all who feel driven out, take courage from our story. We are told that when Jesus heard they had driven the man out, Jesus went and found him. Jesus is the shepherd of the driven out, the beaten down.

And what about those wolves? All of us have been facing the wolves of the coronavirus itself, that continues to kill and maim daily. Add to that the wolf of political division about the pandemic, about masks, vaccines, what I safe, what is not. The deepening and hardening of political divides may in the long run prove more deadly to our body politic than the virus itself.

I believe we are all facing wolves that are snatching and scattering the peace and security for which we long. Wolves from the outside, forces we can't see but feel. Wolves from within our own families, and even within ourselves. Wolves of division and discord. Wolves of lost trust. Wolves of harsh words that can't be unsaid. Actions that hurt and harm. We may feel our very survival is under threat.

The Gospel good news for us today is this: the wolves will not win. We know this, because we have a Good Shepherd who laid down his life to overcome all the wolves that ever were or ever will be. And our Good Shepherd was raised from the dead and lives again. Here with us. We have a Good Shepherd who is in our corner. We are not alone. Whether we are boiling over with rage over changing rules and shifting policies, or we have been driven out from where we want to be, or we feel as though wolves are threatening to snatch and scatter us, we have a Good Shepherd on the job. On the beat. To nurture, to protect, to redirect, and to lead us in right paths.

All of us. And "the beat" of this Shepherd is all of creation over all of the earth. Did you catch this pivotal, boundary busting line? "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." (v. 16) Jesus *is not* about keeping certain people out. Never was, never is. Nor should a faith that is formed his name. That's the crazy thing about our radically expansive shepherd: Jesus calls us to look up and look out beyond our little view point, our little perch in whatever little piece of the pasture we happen to have landed in. Jesus keeps calling us to repent and go beyond the mind we have.

In God's creation, on God's good earth, there is one Good Shepherd, One flock: humanity. And one pasture: Earth. This is where our second scripture kicks us into gear: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another...Little Children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3:16). Beloved sheep, here is our call, here is our invitation this day: What are we being called to lay down? Jesus already did the heavy lifting of laying down his life literally on the cross to save us all. That is certainly at the core of this lesson, as we seek to know and love Christ.

We are not being called to get ourselves literally crucified. Jesus did that for us. The invitation for us that I hear is more personal, more daily, but potentially as earth changing. What must we lay down, what can we lay down in order to do our part to love in truth and action? Beloved sheep, we are being called this day to help other sheep who are in need, who have been driven out, those sheep upon whom the wolves prey mercilessly and relentlessly only because they can.

What must we lay down? What are we being called to sacrifice here? Especially in this past week, there are two I must address. First, dear white people, I hear in this scripture Jesus' call to lay down our white privilege and face the truth about the brutality experienced not only at the hands of some police, but also brutality at the hands of a system that has systemically

discriminated against people of color and indigenous people in housing, health care and education. I can only speak about this from my white person perspective. So here it is.

I was born blind to my white privilege. My eyes are being opened slowly to it. One way begins with a true confession from your pastor: I have been stopped by police for driving above the speed limit, more than twice. But I have never felt scared or threatened by more than the possibility of a fine I would have to pay. As a white woman when I get pulled over, yes, my heart starts pounding. But usually, it's because I know I will be really late to wherever I was trying to go. And I will have to deal with the fallout from the cost a traffic ticket and raised car insurance.

Two of my most recent stops were, you might say, in the line of duty. Pastoral duty. And no, I wasn't on the way to an emergency room in a hospital. That was not my excuse. Once was in Urbana, Ohio about 10 pm driving home from guest moderating a session meeting there. Most recently was on County Road C driving into Marshfield on a Saturday morning on my way to preach and record our Sunday morning service. At both of these incidents, the police asked me if I knew how fast I was going and why I was going so fast. Both times I apologetically explained who I was and where I was coming from or going to. A white pastor lady driving too fast.

Because of that: I was not threatened. My car was not searched. I was not even given a ticket. I drove away from each of these stops just a warning. Of course, that was a big relief. Perhaps I had a little bit of "lady pastor privilege" going for me too. But seriously, it was an eye-opening revelation of white privilege at work. I truly believe If my skin were a different color, in central Ohio or in central Wisconsin, either of those stops could have gone very differently. White privilege is real. We need to face it and make sacrifices to right this wrong.

Second, dear residents of our beloved nation and citizens of the earth: Given that we have only one pasture on which the whole world must graze and live and move and have our being. Climate change is real and it is threatening the life of all on this pasture we call earth. I hear in this scripture Jesus' call to lay down our dependence on fossil fuels. We must do what we can, in truth and action, to save our dying planet, that God so loved. We are beginning to set goals, beginning to imagine possibilities that are strange and disorienting, as it was for the Pharisees to see a blind man's sight restored. Not so long ago, in my dad's life time, who was born in 1917, we transitioned from horses to cars. Laying down fossil fuels in the next decade or two may seem unthinkable. But that is the kind of sacrifice for the greater good to which Jesus is calling us here.

It may seem like I am talking about changes that are too big and too hard to imagine. Or we may ask, what difference does it make if I use the same plastic container twice, or go to the extra effort to recycle all that I can. Never underestimate the power of small decisions. They can turn the tide. A seemingly small move can even bend the arc of justice, of goodness and mercy in ways beyond our imagination. Take heart, take courage from the decision of 17-year old Darnella Frazier as she walked to the store with her cousin to buy snacks in Minneapolis on May 30. Unlike my white privileged perspective, seeing police on the scene, made her feel unsafe. Then

seeing officers, including Derek Chauvin, interacting with George Floyd, she decided to take a video of the incident that day and send it to the authorities.

I tell this story here, because we can see Darnella's split-second decision to video this scene, was what brought to the light of day, the unbearable truth of how George Floyd was murdered for trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill. Darnella's action exposed a truth that opened the eyes, especially of white people, to a truth Jesus would not have us ignore. A wolf was attacking one of his sheep, and now he has been held accountable. This is good news for good policing, for our criminal justice system, and for people of color. We would never have known the truth, there would never have been accountability without this video.

Friends, you may have seen the bumper sticker, "When the going gets tough, the tough go fishing." Not our Good Shepherd. Not Jesus. When the going gets tough, he's "All-in." When the going gets tough here at FPC, as much as many of us like to fish, we are all-in. I've seen it. And it is a beautiful thing. We were born to risk, to sacrifice, and to be follow our "All-in" shepherd, wherever we are called. Let us let Jesus open our eyes to bring his vision into reality for our time. Right here. Let us do what we can to lay down our lives for the good of all God's sheep living in God's one green pasture. Amen.