

## “Follow the Shepherd”

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – 4.25.2021 – Psalm 23; John 10:11-18/B

We are “Rugged Individuals”. We have been taught to “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” and “you can do anything you want to do, if you set your mind to it.” Western civilization has defined itself in America for generations as a society that has as its foundation, the building block of each unique individual.

But not so, in Jesus’ world. Not so, in the ancient civilizations in which he moved, illustrated by the stories he taught using things the folks knew about. They had always understood the foundational element of human endeavor was kinship - a family - a tribe - a people, not the singular individual who had little identity or worth outside of their clan. Thus, it is odd for us to hear a plural, “all y’all” when Jesus says “you.” For we hear almost every “you” reference as singular - individual. In contemporary terms, ***“it’s all about me.”***

But the English language has a few God winks built into it. Consider the word, “sheep”. There really is no singular form for one solitary sheep. We always use the plural form of the word, as if there were ***always*** more than one. And maybe there is something to be said for always being in a ***flock***...for a flock always has a shepherd, and that’s a very good thing. Especially, if it is The Good Shepherd.

There are things that any shepherd does: leading, tending to the sheep, keeping them safe from danger, bringing them to better pastures to eat. But this story speaks of Jesus as a shepherd who does more than just care for his flock’s basic needs. Jesus knows each of his flock **by name**; he seeks out those on the margins of the pasture and brings them back. Jesus lays down his life, risking everything for his sheep - whether that be the 99, or just the 1. Even a “good” shepherd wouldn’t take that risk, but Jesus did. God did...

It is sometimes intimidating to think of our calling, as followers of Jesus. The invitation to care for our hurting world is sometimes overwhelming, and we may feel utterly unequipped to do so. We may stumble, feel lost, or fail. But remember this: There is no failure, mistake, hurt, regret, or burden which can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

So, who have been the shepherds in your life? What has been your North Star of moral living and ethical choosing? Where did your direction, your vision, your *calling* come from? My Coach tells me the answer is always within you...but the more I read the Bible and the more I study God’s word, the more I know that I need to be looking to other sources beyond myself. I need to always go back to the basics: First, there was God. THEN there were people. We are not independent of God, but we were created BY God - loved by God - comforted, provided for and valued. By GOD. *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.* So, let’s go a bit deeper into the most well-known piece of scripture, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd, I *shall not want* (I will never *be in want*)  
The LORD *makes me* lie down in green pastures (Provides abundant food to eat)  
and leads me beside still waters (and quiet waters to drink from.)  
You restore *my soul*, O LORD, (You are the source of what is me) and guide me  
along right pathways for your name’s sake. (You help me follow God’s righteousness)  
Tho’ I walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Even when I face death itself)  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me (there is no evil with you)  
your rod and your staff they comfort me. (your guiding presence calms me)  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies (Even in the midst of hate)  
You anoint my head with oil and my cup is running over. (Only you can bring peace.)  
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life (When I follow you,  
I am behind you, in the line with goodness and mercy)  
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (For where else would I go?)

Recent video - <https://www.facebook.com/shill.mail/videos/10100867926346608>  
 very deep ditch (running along the road) and a little boy pulling the sheep out of the ditch by his hind leg. Once upright, the sheep bounds over the chasm, runs alongside the gaping ditch and flings itself, headfirst, back down into the ditch some 20 feet away from the boy. Aren't we just like that? Wanting to go back to where we were, even if it's head down in a ditch?!

This past week we have watched Prince Philip's funeral in England; the verdict in the trial of Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis; an unseasonal snowfall in April; Earth Day; all while watching a rise in Coronavirus cases and a decline in those willing to receive vaccine; honoring H.S. Seniors; and focusing on Jesus as the Good Shepherd. If you were yearning for a return to normal, you might as well give in to the idea that there is no normal anymore - nor even a new normal - but every day as we awake, we still believe and hope for something brand new. Because we have proven that we are resilient, and that we will weather whatever this crazy world brings THIS DAY, simply because we know that God is all about new life.

Are we really up to answer God's call to follow him? There is a world of hurt coming out, as the pandemic's grip lessens. People are empty, depressed, afraid of coming back out into public, no longer comfortable interacting with those who we used to moved around with in the marketplace and workplace so easily. We are out of the habit of gathering physically for worship, and some have even taken a sabbatical from their faith. The church's decline, which was already evident long before last March, has been turned into a bonfire by the fuel of a divisively partisan political environment and the match lit by the global pandemic.

"So where do we go from here? ...I think we start (by) acknowledging our common bond as a community of equals. If we can do just that much... we will have laid the groundwork for the... (re-weaving) of the fabric of the culture itself. Begin there, with how we respect one another, and the rest will come of its own accord."

We will create a new flock with a new generation who might look nothing like the sheep we are used to. It is a flexible gathering, some in person, some virtual - and it is composed of elders and children of all shapes and sizes and colors and everyone in between and outside our doors. Some have been ignored for far too long. Some have been included for far too long! And some are suffering deeply from poverty, inequity, privilege, wealth, disease, death and the effects of evil in our world.

And yet, they are all precious in God's sight. So, we will be seeking out the lost (and the disapproved, the disconnected and the fallen away) as well as our neighbors and friends and colleagues and family members who might not remember - or even know - the goodness of God's love. And that, my friends, is where this church reclaims its mission.

The LORD is my Shepherd - the Good Shepherd whom I follow. Following Jesus is what he asks of us - each time we encounter God through him. "Follow Me" is God's call to us. And if we, with the disciples, follow his Easter morning invitation, we will meet Jesus in Galilee - at "home." He called the disciples to follow him to their homes by the great sea. Not so much to model him (as if we could even come close!) but by following him home - to the place where we are most ourselves. To start again.

We are not alone. We are sheep - we belong to a flock - so we are never on our own and never without the One who knows us by name. The One who calls us to follow him for daily bread, to follow him out as we serve those in need, and to follow him home to our very soul. Dearest Good Shepherd - Savior of the World - lead us and guide us on the paths of righteousness, until we follow you all the way home. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser, Advent/Olathe, KS.

**Resources:** Maggie Falenshek for *ELCA Faith Lens 4/25*; Steven Charleston, **Facebook post**; Rev. Kenneth Brannon, "*Sustenance, Safety and Surplus*" for Day 1 online