

Easter A-4, Good Shepherd Sunday

April 13, 2008

Psalm 23; John 10: 1-10

Title: Life Bracketed

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Seen any sheep lately? Certainly, you think about them all the time, counting them at night, singing about them on the way to work.

“Honey, whose turn is it to feed the sheep.”

Let’s go take Lamby for a walk.

Describes your life to a tee? Mine either.

This is Good Shepherd Sunday...our church’s day...if we have a patron saint....it’s this image....life under the Good Shepherd.

In a new Lutheran congregation, the pastor chooses the name, with the Bishop’s approval. My favorites were Resurrection, Grace, Christ—all these names were already taken by churches in our conference.

So....Good Shepherd....a fine, biblical name, under which we’d be proud to live.

Our bishop at the time thought Good Shepherd too antiquated for modern suburbia.....people who hadn’t seen any sheep lately. As I recall I sheepishly told him Good Shepherd was about as antiquated as the term Bishop. So here we are almost 25 years under the name Good Shepherd Lutheran Church.

To my knowledge we have never played with this title....Good Shepherd Church where no one is ever too baaaaad. Come to Good Shepherd where the sheep are never sheered, we won’t pull the wool off of you. It’s a good thing we have never done so.

Those of us who belong to Good Shepherd congregations have perhaps the greatest privilege....the gifts of Psalm 23 and John 10 to live under. Psalm 23 erupts with life shaping words “The Lord is my shepherd....and then those 6 huge words I SHALL NOT BE IN

WANT. The remaining 5 verses describe what it is to live under the Shepherd. And Jesus our Lord intentionally takes on the shepherd image, assertively declaring himself to be the one true shepherd. About himself Jesus makes the most significant claim of all-I HAVE COME THAT YOU MY HAVE LIFE AND HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY. These two faith statements—I shall not want and life is abundantly given serve to bracket life.

Neither Jesus or the Psalmist are Pollyannaish about life. They both identify the dark realities---bandits and thieves; valleys and enemies. People and events are going to try to pull us away from the abundant life with God. And it's true that in the history of God's people there are those times, lamentable as they are, when we listen to other voices, when we believe we are the gate, when we in want grab for ourselves.

Our ancestors justified slavery, drowning witches, dehumanizing Jews, killed Muslims....all in the name of Christ. And in the rich history of this still young congregation we too have forgotten who is in charge, sought to secure our future, lived in fear. What do we do, we who daily, hourly, almost by the minute are bombarded with the belief that to live is to desire. To want more stuff, more options, more privileges, more freedom. Like our spiritual ancestors Adam and Eve we find ourselves unknowingly saying "I'm not sure I can trust the Shepherd, so I best secure my wants."

A current running TV commercial has a lover of basketball shooting hoops in a small childlike hoop. He wants to attend the Final Four. He will not be going because the particular cell phone he uses doesn't work in that location. He's being called with dream tickets, but he'll never know it. Did he miss out on abundant life, living in want? Is the right cell phone what gives life?

It's God's companionship that gives life, transforms every situation. That's the claim of Psalm 23 and John 10.....being led by this Shepherd.

What wild, rich claims. Sheep need green pastures, still water and safe pathways. All these needs are provided for.

More than anything Good Shepherd Sunday holds before us that everything is a gift. As Martin Luther says in his Small Catechism God gives everything needed for life...everything.

He calls his own sheep by name. MADISON ROSE FULTON called by name. The Shepherd knows us by name—we are not orphans, alone, without the intimate presence of Life. And it is the responsibility of us all to help MADISON ROSE follow the voice of the shepherd...

Here we have work to do....to saturate reality with God. To awaken our awareness of the voice of the shepherd. The whole purpose of encouraging at home –devotions, caring conversations, acts of service, traditions ---all this is to help us know the shepherd. Sending children, youth and adults off to camp help re-shepherd us, call us to write our own version of Psalm 23. All this strengthens our following and draw us to Jesus' promise of abundant life.

Two Saturdays ago, I spent one of the longest hours of my life. Our son Peter who lives in Boston was taking his third drivers training behind the wheel experience. I sat in the back seat behind the instructor.

He turned left across two lanes of heavy traffic. He almost took the mirror off parked cars. He did a three point turn in five points. At stop signs he was so far out I was certain we would be hit. I considered asking to get out several times. I wanted to throw up once. I closed my eyes several times. The instructor several times gently grabbed the steering wheel. She never raised her voice. She kept Peter's attention; he responded to her instruction.

What a profound life lesson. We think we are in charge. But really we are in the back seat and the true gift of life abundant is the life time art and soulful privilege of together following the Shepherd, receiving the life he gives us, so that we too can say I SHALL NOT LIVE IN WANT and receive the abundant life Christ gives us.

Behold the beauty of the Shepherd. Behold his cross, his star, his empty tomb.

Behold the Samaritan, the widow and the penny, the water flowing from the rock, behold the manna, the table filled and ready, the mercy of the cross.

Behold two ancient lovers walking toward sunset; the young man running just to feel the air on his face; the woman starting the lawn mower; the loved one writing. Behold the long ago friend who calls from far away; behold the children who come home for a visit. Behold the preschoolers skipping to music, molding play dough, singing songs of faith, watching a bug on the wall, holding hands with a classmate.

The Lord is My Shepherd. I have everything I need.

I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.

People of Good Shepherd, life is bracketed from beginning to end by the abundance of the Shepherd.