

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Today, on the Liturgical Calendar, is the Fourth Sunday of Easter. It is also referred to as the Good Shepherd Sunday. Each of the lectionary passages deals with shepherding and sheep.

Typical of this Sunday, John's image of Jesus as the "Good Shepherd" in chapter 10, is very often read: **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me...."**

The Epistle reading for today is from in 1 John 3. In a similar way, the writer begins with these words: **"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."**

The two verses that follow in 1 John 3 - "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's good and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help" and "Little children, let us us love, not in word or speech, but in truth or action," raise great questions for us to wrestle with and reflect on as a congregation.

And then there is Psalm 23. Probably the most read and beloved of all the Psalms. Most of us might be able to share this one from memory, because it is so familiar to us.

For all the different paths I could take with this sermon, the one I felt we needed to be mindful of this morning, is the one that takes us through, as the King James Version so eloquently says: "the valley of the shadow of death." The New Revised Standard Version refers to it as "dark valley". Other versions, speak of it as "deep, dark valleys."

We all feel like we are walking through that valley filled with death, sometimes alone and sometimes as a community.

The Psalmist in his next words reminds us - **"I fear no evil, for the Good Shepherd's rod and staff, his presence, comforts me."**

When it comes to images of the “Good Shepherd,” Jesus is often depicted in paintings and pictures, as carrying a lamb over his shoulder, through a green grassy meadow, with a warm smile on his face, helping us to feel at safe, secure, protected and at peace, in his loving presence.

But really, in my mind, those pictures are meant to deceive us, conveying a false sense of security.

A real shepherd, one who has been out in the wilderness, tending to his own flocks, protecting them from all the dangers lurking, needs to be dusty and dirty, unwashed, smelling like sweat, a bit of wild hair, a scarf, and of course, a bit of dung smell coming from his sandals.

The “Good Shepherd” who is our Shepherd, the one who leads us through those dark valleys filled with death, does not live in this building, because we don’t live in this building. We live out there, in the world, and the world, even here in Cambridge at times, is a very scary place.

Mark Sandlin writing in his blog spot, *The God Article*, says: **“The shepherd isn’t in the sheepfold. The shepherd is beyond its boundaries, beyond the walls, beyond a place of safety and comfort. The shepherd comes to drive out his sheep from safety into pasture where there is abundant life.”**

And it is out there, in the midst of the life we all live, each day, where we all walk in the shadows of that deep dark valley, filled with health concerns, personal and global economic concerns, job stresses, housing issues, hunger, poverty, violence and war that the Good Shepherd drives us, and guides us, never leaving us alone.

### **Emmanuel: God-with-us.**

And here is the Good News, we aren’t alone, because we, filled with the Spirit of the Good Shepherd, created in the image of God, and reflecting the Christ to one another, walk with one another.

In the name of the Good Shepherd, we go together into the scariest places of life we all face, lifting each other up into the sacred Light of Love, that shines through our care and compassion, even at the cost of our lives, following the Way of Christ.

This is what the writer of 1 John is saying to his audience, which is all these years later, us, when he wrote: **“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”**

Rev. Sharron Riessinger Blezard writing on the Stewardship of Life Institute (SOLI) blog says: **“What does it mean to lay down our lives for another? We may never be called to give up our physical lives for others, but it might happen. We are called to put our own wants aside to do what we can to meet the needs of others, to share the burden, to alleviate pain and suffering when and where we can. It means looking at one’s glass as always full enough to share, as being content with enough and not hoarding our time, our talents, or our possessions. To lay down our lives for one another means that as we live in community we work at the hard parts of being together and staying together.”**

**“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for your rod and staff, comfort me.”**

Beloved, by our love, and through the giving of our lives for the needs of others in our community and world, we journey together with God who is with us and in us, as we are with each other. Because we know and believe this, we fear no evil. How else could we make through the valley to those promised green pastures by still waters?

Amen.