

## *Good Shepherding*

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, May 3, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23  
I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

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

*(On this day, Kamryn Nicole, daughter of Chris and Kim Taylor, was baptized during our worship.)*

Chris and Kim, as parents, you probably know by now that you model appropriate behavior for your children. Not just teach it, telling big brother Aiden what to do and what not to do, but actively model good behavior yourselves. When Kamryn is a little bit older, she, too, will witness your behavior, and learn from it. Such is the life of a household with children.

In my household, for example, it is not appropriate to burp at the dinner table. Contrary to popular notion, most of the time, one can restrain one's self from such actions. But if one simply cannot contain that burp and it erupts forth, one knows to cover one's mouth and say, "Excuse me."

Perhaps your household has a similar rule—no burping at the dinner table. But Chris and Kim, beware! As your children grow, they will tell you that in other cultures burping is a sign of good etiquette which lets the host know it was a great meal. Do not be swayed by their protestations or be deterred from teaching your kids.

Now that's a rather mundane example. For many years to come, you will be teaching your children, modeling right behavior. In fact, you made promises today to raise Kamryn in the Christian faith—promises to raise her for a life of discipleship following the ways of our Lord Jesus, and such life in Christ includes deeds of love and goodness in his name. Right behavior. Your children will learn these things not only in worship and Sunday school, Vacation Bible School and Youth Group. They will also have opportunity to learn these things at some of the oddest and yet most critical moments. And you must help them. Aiden and Kamryn will need you to shepherd them through the early years of their lives that those years may be lived faithfully and they will grow up well. It is your job.

Did you notice I just said you will shepherd them? I chose that word deliberately. The Church traditionally calls this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter "Good Shepherd Sunday." The lessons in each year of our three-year lectionary cycle have something to do with shepherds. Some years we'll read Old Testament prophecy that declared to Israel how its religious leaders and even many of its kings were poor shepherds, faithless and self-serving. Each year on this day we will read the familiar and comforting words of Psalm 23. And we always, as we do today, have a gospel passage from John in which Jesus calls himself the good Shepherd.

These words that Jesus speaks—*I am the good shepherd*—are crucial. For here is a place where Jesus, through a very few simple words and a common image, indicates that what he is about is identical to the will and purpose of God. People understood the imagery of the shepherd, and certainly understood what being a good shepherd implied. Psalm 23, as well as various prophets' words about shepherds, would have been well known to Jesus and his listeners as well as John and the readers of his gospel. Jesus' words here make clear that there is something unique, something divine about his ministry. He embodies everything good that God intends for his creation; he acts in ways obedient to God's commands and reflective of God's love. Anyone who hears these words from our Lord Jesus discovers through them that Jesus is our shepherd, and we need the good shepherding he provides. We need him. So let's go back to Psalm 23 in order to learn what good shepherding is.

The first thing we learn from Psalm 23 is that we have a deep, abiding relationship with God. It's a relationship for life—and beyond. The psalm opens with *The Lord is my shepherd...* That means he is a shepherd for me, for you. Then partway through the psalm, the writer switches from talking about the shepherd in 3<sup>rd</sup> person (*He, his*) and instead talks about the shepherd in 2<sup>nd</sup> person (*You, your*). See, we have a relationship with God where we can speak **to** God in praise and prayer! And so the psalmist writes: *Even though I walk through the darkest valley you are with me. Your rod and your staff—they comfort me.* And the last verse of Psalm 23? The psalmist declares he will live in the presence of the Lord forever. From beginning to end we hear in this psalm that we are not alone. In good times and in bad, surrounded by enemies and in the very shadow of death, we will not be abandoned by the shepherd. Even when circumstances in life could lead us to be afraid (and which of us hasn't worried in the last week about the economy, about the war, about a pandemic of influenza?)—even then, the psalmist declares, God will not leave his people. He will stay with us to guide, care for, and protect us. That's good shepherding.

A second thing we learn from Psalm 23 is that not only does the shepherd stick with us through thick and thin, the Lord God also provides for us on a daily basis: *The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.* A better translation from the Hebrew might be this: *I shall lack nothing. I shall lack no good thing.*

Oh, there are many things I “want.” Each of us probably has a long list of things we “want”: a really cool car, a particular designer handbag, the latest electronic gadget. But what's being expressed in Psalm 23 is that God provides daily what I need. I lack no good thing. And you know, if God is with me, and considers me to be his sheep (his child), and will stick with me through all things, and will keep me with him forever, well, that's a pretty good description of just how well he provides. Then, if I look at the bounty of resources before me, the beauty of creation surrounding me, the friendship and love abounding in the people I know in this community and other places I go—boy, I lack no good thing.

But don't suppose Psalm 23 is only spoken by an individual **for** an individual. We read it today as a gathered community. Israel read this psalm—sang it, actually—in worship where the community had gathered. And if it is a psalm that expresses God's shepherding care of a faith community, an entire people, it says a lot about how we ought to care for each other in God's name. It says a lot about the shepherding **we** do.

Jesus tells us what that care should be. A few chapters beyond today's gospel lesson, Jesus commands his disciples to love one another as he has loved them. He shows them what that love looks like by washing their feet, with all humility and tenderness. Yet he hints in our gospel passage today just how full and great his love will be for his people as he says this: *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

We know, post-resurrection, that Jesus did indeed lay down his life for us—on that cross. And so we might wonder to what extent we are to love one another as he has loved us. We might wonder what the words in our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson ultimately mean when we read: *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 do we do that? How are we to be good shepherds for one another, and does it cost us our physical lives? There are situations where a person does lay down their life, does die for another. Some of us here have been privileged to know people who have given the last full measure—on the battlefield for the sake of their comrades, or in a disaster in order to save a life.

But not all of us will find ourselves in such a situation. In fact, most of us will never find ourselves in that place. That is not to say, however, that we will not lay down our lives. Chris and Kim, as parents you not only model right behavior, you also lay aside your own needs and desires in order to care for your children. The food on your plate will grow cold while you feed and then clean up your kids—particularly on spaghetti night. You will do without a solid night's sleep when one of your children is feverish, throwing up, or frightened by a bad dream. From the school project you learn about today that's due tomorrow to the sheer multitude of sporting events and concerts you will attend over the next 18 years—those things will find you setting aside your own things and making time for them. Good shepherding and caring love—the kind of shepherding and loving that Jesus did and now calls us to do—consists of laying aside our tendency to live only for ourselves, and instead orient ourselves to the needs of others.

And not just in our individual households, but in this household of faith, and all the places you and I go. As John so clearly wrote to the Church in our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson with these pointed words: *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.*

From feeding the hungry to worshiping with prisoners... from visiting those homebound or hospitalized to listening to someone else's heartache and wiping away their tears... we lay down our lives for others. Jesus Christ, our good shepherd, our Lord and Savior and friend, has shown us his love and thus given us life. But just as well, he has modeled for us the way we are to be, if we would claim to be his. **AMEN.**

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