

Sermon: The Ultimate Shepherd  
4 Easter, Year A  
Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

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The Lord is my Shepherd.

This psalm, the best known of *all* the psalms, is attributed to King David, who was himself a shepherd of sheep before he became king and a shepherd of God's people. The metaphor of God being the Good Shepherd of God's flock of people permeates the Bible.

This psalm is often used at the bedsides of the dying and at funerals, because it is such a centering tool, bringing the listener back to the reality of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness. Many years ago, while I was doing my CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, at a hospital, feeling VERY much out of my element as a chaplain intern, I entered the room of a psychotic man. At some point I suggested we pray the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm together. It was something I had decided to commit to memory that summer, or shall I say, *recommit* as I had learned it as a child. But as we began to say it together, I heard a power and authority in his voice as he said those words. This man, who was so troubled in mind and body wasn't just reciting it; it was obvious this man had *lived* this psalm. I can still see his face as he said, "Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the SHADOW of DEATH, I will fear no evil, for thou are with me!" It was obvious this psalm had held him close to God through peaks of glory and through the valley of the shadow of death. Even though this man's mind had been scattered, he had trusted God and God had been faithful. This man knew where his true home was; he knew his Good Shepherd, too.

I think many of us sheep feel scattered these days. The church is in exile. I think most of the time our image of church is one where we are gathered in this or some other church building. But in reality church is not just about the building; it's about our mission – to love God and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We come together to be fed and then we go out into the world to feed others. We remember how deeply loved by God we are so we can go out and share that same love in the world. Like the tides of the ocean there is an ebb and a flow to our life together as church. We come together, we come to our spiritual home and then we venture out. At one church I belonged to there were signs that you could only read as you left church that read, "You are now entering the mission field." Well, it seems we are *staying* in the mission field right now, wherever we find ourselves. Yet even in exile, God does not abandon us. Just has us learning a new song, has us learning a new dance, and has us learning how to be church with new parameters.

As I prepare to depart from you, I want to share an image of Emmanuel being church. Both the ebb and the flow, the being in the church building and being in the mission field. Several years ago, we built our new altar. The so-called temporary one had been in place about 35 years! Doug Roller drew up the plans, an anonymous donor gave the special wood, Jane Manning was our project manager; Brookie Dickerman's children gave the funds as a memorial, Paul Borzelleca, William Lott and folks at Taylor and Booty organ factory did the physical work and others

helped with practical wisdom. While it is covered up right now with our Easter frontal, after Easter take a look at the beauty of this amazing creation, given by the church, consecrated by Bishop Heath Light, to God's glory. This is an example of the church coming together to share various gifts and talents for the benefit of all who worship here. I would call this our home project, if you will, the church gathered in this building. The altar is symbolic of the Good Shepherd feeding us, the church gathered together. This is the part of church life many of us miss so much.

Now let me give you a short series of images of the church scattered. One is at Trinity Church's parish hall, where members of Emmanuel gather about once a month to serve lunch to anyone who walks through the door. When I walk into the kitchen I see some of you at the sink washing dishes, others pulling food out of the oven, other talking to, and listening to and serving the lunch to our guests.

Another image is at Augusta Correctional Facility, the prison, where a good sized group of you go several times a year to bring a good word and music to inmates. You show your ID, remove your shoes and belt, get patted down, you go through locked door after door, and hearing a lot of clanging along the way, finally arriving at the gym where you greet with smiles on your faces anywhere from 35-80 inmates. You may have some fear and trepidation someplace within you but you do not let that stop you. You greet the men with smiles and a kind word; you sit with them, sing with them, offering healing prayer and encouragement.

One final image I offer. One evening I walk into City Hall for a Building Bridges for the Greater Good meeting. Building Bridges is a secular group whose goal is racial reconciliation in the city of Staunton. As I find my seat I see that at least twenty out of the forty or so people at the meeting are from Emmanuel, and you proceed to get involved! This, too, is the church scattered!

And I know of your involvement in Haiti, in the LGBTQ Center, environmental groups, food pantries, and so many other areas where you are lifting up the poor, the marginalized, the hurting, and those who need healing. You may be scattered but God is working in you. The Lord, your Shepherd is leading you. And while during this time of the pandemic we may feel we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we must not fear. For God is with us. While we may feel in exile right now, God still calls us to make a difference wherever we are, to share the love of God in each and every situation we find ourselves in.

I have had the privilege and honor of being your earthly shepherd of Emmanuel Church these past seven+ years, and it is time for me to depart. I will miss you so much! I will feel, no doubt, very scattered as I leave this body of the faithful, this flock of God's sheep. One day when the church is gathered once again, I hope to return for a Sunday to say a proper good-bye. In the meantime, I want to encourage you to keep *being* church, wherever you are, just keep being your compassionate, forgiving, loving selves and God will be with you, Emmanuel. Remember Jesus will always be your shepherd, even as the earthly ones come and go.

And I wonder if we can commit or recommit to learning Psalm 23, not just as a nice thing to know, but as something to actually live into? Can we pray this psalm together, one more time?

## Psalm 23

1 The LORD is my shepherd; \*

I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures \*

and leads me beside still waters.

3 He revives my soul \*

and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I shall fear no evil; \*

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; \*

you have anointed my head with oil,

and my cup is running over.

6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, \*

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Amen!