

## Sermon

The Rev. Nancy Conklin

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Sunday, April 30, 2023

Liturgically, today is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” For many of us, our earliest image of God is Jesus as our Good and Gentle Shepherd who lovingly cares for us. It speaks to what we all experience at times, that deep inner uneasiness of being vulnerable and insecure in our world. The sudden death of someone, a near miss in our car, a call from the doctor, and we’re instantly reminded again of how fragile life really is and how easily we can be led astray by our fear and anxiety, no longer living the abundant life Jesus desires for us.

A depiction of that life painted most beautifully for us in the beloved 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Hebrew scholars believe the psalm echoes the voice of a lost and lonely traveler wandering in the desert. The blazing heat of the day is long gone, and the bitter cold of the desert night is coming fast. The road he was traveling has faded into the twilight. The weary traveler is parched and hungry. In the distance, a jackal howls. The man’s heart fills with fear as his mind begins to race: “Why did I set off on this journey in the first place? Will it be my last?” Seemingly out of nowhere, a figure appears — a shepherd who knows this wilderness and all its hidden dangers.

The shepherd approaches the lost wanderer and leads him out of the darkness to a place where the last beams of sun still light the way ahead. They arrive at an oasis — a grassy meadow. His rescuer invites the weary traveler to lie down and rest awhile. After the man settles himself down, the gracious stranger goes to a nearby spring, cups water in his hands, and offers it. The traveler drinks and drinks, until he can drink no more. He looks up and sees his protector standing over him, holding in one hand a rod, a gnarled club he uses to defend his sheep from desert marauders. In his other hand, a staff used to rescue sheep who plunge into the depths of deep ravines. Seeing these tools brings comfort to the frightened man.

After the traveler has rested a bit, the two journey onward, this time following the right path to a black goatskin tent pitched in an encampment of tents. The lost and forsaken man has been brought into a tribe of Bedouins — determined people who know how to live in the wilderness of life. Others, more worldly, consider them strange, outcasts. Who in their right mind would live in such ominous surroundings? Fear again fills the weary traveler’s mind, not sure what to make of these tent dwellers. Yet, they seem content to be living together in the fold of each other, sharing of their scarce resources with one another.

The Good Shepherd who has led him to this place of refuge invites the bewildered follower into his own tent, lit inside with oil lamps, decorated with intricate and beautiful woven carpets. Looking around the tent, the follower’s fear subsides because he knows Middle Eastern hospitality dictates that as long as he is in this Good Shepherd’s tent, his host is bound by honor to protect his guest. The two men sit cross-legged at a low table and the shepherd spreads out a meal. Starved, the traveler thinks to himself “food never tasted so good.” Then, in a timeless gesture of hospitality, the shepherd anoints his guest’s head with oil and pours wine into his cup

until it overflows. The traveler's worst fears have been transformed. No longer does he feel lost, alone, and afraid, but deep serenity and trust at home with this Good and Gentle Shepherd and embedded in his faithful flock. Experiencing so unforgettable this rescue from the very jaws of death by a simple shepherd, the weary traveler accepts it as the very expression of God's own love and concern for him and, so, he writes, "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want."

Like this lost, lone, weary traveler, we have received an abundance of traveling mercies — nourishment, shelter, protection, and security — from our Risen Lord that we might live the life he intends for us. One of the many gifts I received from our participation in the Good Friday service was preaching the First Word in the context of the black church's call-and-response style of preaching. I immediately felt the energy in the room as my words were met with "preach it, sister" or "yes, Lord." Two of the preachers that followed used one of the most commonly used calls after proclaiming the promise of God's word — "Can I get a witness?" — to which people shouted "Amen" or raised their hands in praise to God, testifying to the truth and power of that promise in their lives. "Can I get a witness?" Echoing our Risen Lord's final words to his disciples right before he ascended into heaven after his many post-resurrection appearances — "You shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." This morning, Jesus promises us, I came that you might have life and have it abundantly. Can I get a witness? Raise your hand, say "Amen" if your life is more abundant because of what the Lord has done or is doing in and through you. Being good stewards of the abundant life we have with Jesus means witnessing to those traveling mercies we have received from our Good Shepherd.

So many people we know, and many more we don't, are simply existing, struggling to cope, living a diminished existence. So embroiled in fear, anxiety, depression, loneliness, held captive by their addictions or oppressed by their circumstances. Led astray, thinking abundance lies in the land of plenty. They need to hear our witness of how, through our own difficult times, our Good Shepherd has led us beside still waters of mercy, into green pastures of grace, and guided us on the right path. Bearing witness to our Risen Lord's gentle and loving touch that has filled the hunger in our heart. How his companionship and the companionship of other members of this flock has delivered us from our loneliness and depression.

Who is the lone, weary traveler in your life needing you to shepherd them to the Good Shepherd, that they might find the abundance of mercy and grace you have found?