

## **Love in truth and action**

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B; April 21, 2024

Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

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*And so through all the length of days,  
thy goodness faileth never;  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise  
within thy house forever.*

*In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
Amen.*

I am finding myself completely enthralled with how our scripture stories, in this season of Eastertide, are building upon each other and then connecting with us, right where we are. With each story we hear this Easter season we are moving outwards- it is no longer enough to marvel in awe and wonder at the Risen Christ appearing to us or even to go and say: "I have seen the Lord!" *but it is time to put all this into action.*

As Peter says in today's readings from Acts- and remember this is still a response to Peter telling the man lame from birth to get up and walk: **"If we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone...let it be known to all of you that this happened by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead."** I love how we can hear this as if it is spoken directly to us because you know I believe that it is: *What if we are questioned today because of a good deed we do for someone, some act of love or compassion or kindness- what will we say?* Will our answers, and more importantly, our lives and our actions point directly towards our God from whom both our longing and our ability to serve and witness comes?

Following almost directly after last week's reading in 1 John, today we hear: ***"We know love by this, that he***

*laid down his life for us- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the Name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”* Remember that to be called ‘children of God’ is an identity, a vocation spoken into existence by God- and it carries with it the responsibility of loving God’s people and the world God has created as God has loved us. Only then do we abide in the fullness of the love of both Father and Son as is intended for us- only then can we love from this place in such a way that others are brought into God’s abiding love, as it says in today’s Gospel: *“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them in also...and there will be one flock, one shepherd.”*

Today is an interesting Sunday to talk about this- the fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd

Sunday and our Collect and readings center around images and descriptions of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. These readings, especially psalm 23, are among the most familiar and beloved of all scripture and hold deep meaning for us- thanks to centuries of visual art and music the tenderness, the presence, the faithful protection of Jesus as our Shepherd and we as the vulnerable lamb held safely in his loving arms is the image our souls cling to when we are afraid, or sorrowful, or overwhelmed by our own weakness or mortality. Today's Gospel expands this image to its fullest: the sheep and the shepherd know each other with a deep kind of knowing and the shepherd stands ready to protect his sheep with everything he has, even his very life. He is not a thief or a bandit whose intentions are only to hurt and destroy, but the true shepherd will even find and bring to safe haven the sheep who are not of this fold so ***“they will listen to the Shepherd’s voice and there will be one flock, one shepherd.”***

There is always a challenge, especially with scripture that is so familiar and precious to us, like psalm 23, of finding a new way of receiving these beloved words that we have not considered before. It is even a bit of a risk, because we do not want to be disturbed when it comes to our favorite texts- they are spiritual comfort food and we want them exactly as we have always known them. I have been thinking, especially with all these texts around Jesus as the Good Shepherd, that what we are most accustomed to seeking in scripture is *what scripture teaches us about God*. It is God's gift of the abundance of safe and beautiful places where we can thrive- I am thinking here of those green pastures and still waters- of God's restoration when our soul is weary- of God's guidance and protection and steadfast presence even when darkness is all around us- of God's goodness and mercy that we hear of in psalm 23 and has so shaped our collective consciousness of God. It is the author of 1 John reminding

us that God's love for us is so great that God's Son laid down his life so that we might know how to love one another- in ways that not only care for the earthly needs of all people but most importantly point to the God who created us to live fully-to abide- in this love. It is Jesus' promises in today's gospel that nothing will get in the way of the Good Shepherd not only protecting those already in the flock, but also seeking out and protecting and enfolding all others into safety, into community.

And so, now that we have heard of the loving protection of God, heard that we are God's people and the sheep of his pasture, heard that everything we do, every good and loving act is to be done in the name of Jesus and founded on the power of his death and resurrection: ***are we ready to discover what are these readings meant to teach us not only about God but about ourselves, about our lives, our calling as God's people in this world?***  
What are they teaching us about our responsibility, our

response to this shepherding, this abiding, this death-destroying and life-giving love of God that is ours for always? ***Are we living in such a way that we too can proclaim, with clear hearts, that all good gifts, all right actions are founded on this unshakeable love that we share with both the Father and the Son?*** If we claim, as we heard in today's Collect: "O God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the good shepherd of your people, grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name and follow where he leads"- are we willing to walk the road that teaches us what 'following' really means: that assurance of God's presence and love does not remove hardship and suffering from our lives but means God is present with us there? ***Are we bearing witness to all this not only with our words but with our actions, with every fiber of our being?***

***Imagine***...if we really lived as if we believe we are God's children, secure enough in the love we have been given to

extend it to others, so that no one lacks for anything it is within our power to share with them.

*Imagine*...if we really lived as if we do not fear the hardships of this world because our trust is in our God who never leaves us, but is beside us on every road we will travel.

*Imagine*...if we were tireless in our witness that the restoration and abundance of God are meant for all people, no one worthy or left out of the table set before them- that we really all do belong to one flock, with one Shepherd.

*Imagine*...as if belonging to this flock meant not only “You are welcome here”, *but that it meant we need you to share in what our community is all about- which is bearing witness to the fullness of God’s love not only in our worship or in this building but in everything we do*



*to love and care for God's people and all God's glorious creation.*

We already do all this, beloveds, in so many ways. We are a community whose presence in our city makes known our calling to love and care for others and connects deeply with our lives of faith. My prayer for us is that this is always our truest way of being. **Amen.**