

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 25, 2021

Acts of the Apostles 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

Gospel of John 10:11-18

Title: **Following the Good Shepherd**

We are now in the Fourth Sunday of this glorious Easter Season as we watch trees and flowers come alive in all their glory. We rejoice in the Risen Christ and once again we open our hearts as we listen for the one true voice of our Good Shepherd who continues to watch over us with tender love and care.

Scripture continues to open us up to God's abiding love and even though the Psalm and the Reading from John's Gospel are very familiar to us, hopefully, they will give us new insight into what God wants us to hear so that we can share it with others in order to further the Kingdom of God.

Psalm 23 is a very popular psalm which we know is often said at funerals but it is a psalm for all times in our life. This psalm assures us of God's abiding Love as it comforts, strengthens, guides, restores and prepares us for whatever challenges or joys we have to face in our life. As I was preparing my Message for today, a friend called to tell me that she had to take her husband to the ER that night and she was now alone waiting to hear from the doctors. I think we all know how terrifying that can be, so I suggested that my friend pray the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. She later called and told me how much it had calmed her from the anxiety she was feeling and that she now felt more at Peace to be able to accept whatever news the doctors would have for her.

Someone long ago asked me why Psalm 23 was such a popular psalm and I was able to share with them what you will now hear as the sermon for today.

**"The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want."** This line establishes the relationship between two persons, God and each of us. It shows us that we belong which is so important; and because we belong God will not let us want for anything. God will provide for what we need at the very time we need it; because God is the solution to everything we need.

**"He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters."** If we can just remember to take our problems to God, God our shepherd will reveal the green pastures where we can go to find peace and where it is restful. God is

always the one who initiates, we are not forced, God invites us to be in his presence, and God will nourish and sustain us. When we allow God to lead us to the still waters, we know that we will find the living water that quenches our soul, because God is the living water of life.

**“God restores my soul; he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”** To restore is to make whole. Sometimes we venture away from the flock, but the shepherd comes looking for us to bring us back to the path of righteousness, and we are restored again with God.

**“Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”** When we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow death, which could be the death of a loved one, an illness, solitude, despair or lack of faith, to name only a few. What are we going to do? Do we shrink back in anxiety and lock ourselves away; yes, probably at first, but then maybe someone comes to help or we realize that we are not alone, that we do not have to go through this on our own, because God has promised to be with us when he says “Thou art with me.” God is with us to guide us out of whatever situation we find ourselves in.

The **Rod** is a short wooden club which is strengthened at one end with metal and is used as a defensive weapon to protect the sheep from dangerous animals. The **Staff** is used to direct the sheep so they keep following their shepherd. We often see our Bishop carry a Staff with him during Worship which signifies that he is the Shepherd of his flock. These two pieces of equipment, the **Rod** and the **Staff** are not to intimidate us, but to protect and comfort us as they help to draw us closer to God.

**“You prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; you anoint my head with oil, and my cup runs over.”** God is preparing a banquet for us, which is the Table that we come to each week to seek forgiveness and receive refreshment. We know that the enemy is always lurking around the corner to distract us, so we have to be strong to resist all the temptations that await us; but if we fail, and we will, we know God is always there to welcomes us again. **Oil** was used in Biblical time for several things. It was used to anoint guests when they visited your house; the shepherd used oil to put on a cut if the sheep were hurt; and people were anointed for healing. We also use Oil for healing when we either come forward for a healing prayer, or when we visit the sick. **The Cup** that God offers us is the Cup of Salvation, and whatever God gives us is given in abundance. If we stay close to God our cup will never be empty, we will never thirst and it will always be filled with the fountain of Love which is limitless.

**“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”** God represents both goodness and mercy, and in our earthly pilgrimage goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. God lives in us as we in him and we will dwell with God forever in eternity.

This psalm written so very long ago continues to speak to us today and it holds us strong in the arms of God our Shepherd. I hope we will always find Peace and Joy in these inspirational words each time we pray it.

The story of the Good Shepherd in John’s Gospel fits in so well with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It also talks about relationship, the bond between Jesus and the Father which flows into the relationship between Jesus, the Good Shepherd and we, his sheep. One other point I would like to mention here, is when Jesus says that there are other sheep that do not belong but he must bring them into the fold so that they will listen to his voice so that there will be just be one flock and one shepherd. Jesus is talking about the non-Jews as the ‘other sheep;’ Jesus came to save the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

This tells us that there are other people listening to the voice of Jesus who become part of the one flock under the care of the one shepherd. It does not matter who we may think these people are for it is not for us to judge, because they belong to Jesus just as much as we do. We are to welcome all people in the name of Christ and invite them to The Table to partake of the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Salvation. For us, this can be a challenging picture of Christian Unity as we open our doors and our hearts to welcome All to experience the Love and goodness of God.

As we continue our Easter journey the Season of Resurrection, may we be open to allow new thoughts and ideas to spring forth so that we can work on opening doors to bring the Good News of Jesus to others, to help to eliminate some of the injustices we see manifesting around us, as we continue to learn to love our neighbors as ourselves.

My friends in Christ, we continue to follow the One True Shepherd who knows us by name, who laid down his life for us because he loves and cares for each and every one of us.

Just as Christ suffered, so do we;  
Just as Christ prayed, so do we;  
Just as Christ loves, so do we;  
As Christ is raised to Glory  
we now hold him in our hearts,

to give us the strength, courage and love  
to follow in his footsteps so that All will come to know the  
Risen Christ – Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

AMEN