

# Sunday, April 25, 2021

## Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B

### Prayer of the Day

O Lord Christ, good shepherd of the sheep, you seek the lost and guide us into your fold. Feed us, and we shall be satisfied; heal us, and we shall be whole. Make us one with you, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen.**

### First Reading: Acts 4:5-12

*Peter and John had been arrested the previous day because they were proclaiming the news of the resurrection to the people. In today's reading, Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit so that he can proclaim salvation in Jesus' name to the religious authorities.*

<sup>5</sup>The next day [the] rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, <sup>6</sup>with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. <sup>7</sup>When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" <sup>8</sup>Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup>if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup>let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. <sup>11</sup>This Jesus is

'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  
it has become the cornerstone.'

<sup>12</sup>There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

### Psalm: Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. (Ps. 23:1)*

<sup>1</sup>The LORD | is my shepherd;  
I shall not | be in want.

<sup>2</sup>**The LORD makes me lie down | in green pastures  
and leads me be- | side still waters.**

<sup>3</sup>You restore my | soul, O LORD,  
and guide me along right pathways | for your name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>**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. R**

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence | of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is | running over.

**<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days | of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the | LORD forever. R**

## **Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24**

*Jesus' death on our behalf is the clearest demonstration of divine love. This is the very love we share with others, not just through our words but especially through our deeds. In sharing such love we fulfill God's commandments.*

<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup>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?

<sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup>And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him <sup>20</sup>whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. <sup>21</sup>Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; <sup>22</sup>and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

<sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

## **Gospel: John 10:11-18**

*In language that recalls the twenty-third psalm, Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who cares for his sheep. He is willing to die for them, and he is able to overcome death for them.*

[Jesus said:] <sup>11</sup>"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

## **Gospel**

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley; I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

This beloved, often memorized Psalm is very frequently read at funerals. And it is appropriate to use it then. It is comforting to those who mourn and grieve the loss of the deceased.

Beyond its use at funerals, I believe it is one of those passages of scripture that can speak to each of us daily.

If we were to read it regularly, I'm certain we would see how it puts each new day into a right and proper perspective. The Lord is indeed our good shepherd. He leads us to lush pastures and still water. Sheep need green pastures for nourishment and are reluctant to attempt to drink from swiftly moving water.

This scripture passage allows us to clearly see that God's daily shepherding of us gives us what we need to sustain us each and every day.

God, the shepherd, provides all we need – always. Our response is to live in the house of the Lord forever. That is, to follow his lead, to worship him, to be his disciples wherever it is we find ourselves on any given day.

I've always been fascinated that Moses and David were shepherds before they were leaders. And it's interesting that Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah call for a strong, faithful shepherd to gather God's people and protect them from enemies, injustice, and deceiving rulers.

The writers of the New Testament keep the image of the good shepherd alive and well because Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd.

When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," he extends the tradition with a new illustration of God's love – "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." Five times in eight verses, Jesus makes his point – the life that he lays down is not by accident, nor as the victim of enemies' schemery, not because anyone forces him against his will. "I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and...to take it up again."

In this Jesus leaves no doubt about what will happen – both death and resurrection – and why. Throughout John's gospel God's plan for creation – and for us – centers on love and life. Those who plot Jesus' ruin, those who love the darkness and hate the

light, those who imagine they have power to snatch his sheep out of his hand, will inevitably discover that the love and life originating in this shepherd and empowering his followers cannot be overcome.

1 John echoes the importance of this good shepherd, Jesus, in our lives – “we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Jesus shows his love for his followers by showing love for foreigners and enemies, for leaders not quite on the right path, for the rich and afflicted, for the hungry, for the world, and even for the dead.

We are likely to remember that at the last supper, Peter asks, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Jesus answers, “Will you lay down your life for me?” These are words that are filled with irony by Jesus spoken to Peter who just hours later would deny he ever knew Jesus. But at the end of his life, Peter would follow Jesus into a costly discipleship. He would indeed lay down his life.

Now I’m not suggesting that right now, today, we need to lay down our lives. But I believe that before us stands these questions – “What keeps us from following Jesus into the life that truly is life? What do we each need to lay down so that we can take up the life we are meant to live and become the people we are made to be?”

Perhaps before we take these questions on, we first and foremost understand that while we acknowledge Jesus as our shepherd, we should also take the time to understand that we are the sheep. That is to say, that sheep by nature truly need to be led - to pastures, to water, away from all sorts and kinds of enemies and danger.

And that is very good news. However, I suspect most of us at times think and believe we can do it all, that we really and truly don’t need a shepherd. Life is good: food, clothing, shelter, and no particular dangers.

And just when we begin to take that seriously, life may change or we otherwise become aware that we need to give thanks to God for his providence, for his shepherding excellence. We in response need to lead thankful lives day to day, acknowledging God’s presence, his daily shepherding of us – even if we haven’t always been consciously aware of that fact.

So then, back to the questions – what keeps us from following Jesus into the life that truly is life? What do we each need to lay down so that we can take up the life we are meant to live and become the people we are made to be?

The answers, I’m sure, are many and varied: pride, resentment, self-importance, jealousy, self-righteousness, etc., etc., etc.

A look deep within is likely to produce one or two or a long list of what we truly need to lay down as we move forward into the life God intended for us. It’s what he does, in a sense, as our good shepherd.

He leads, guides, directs, and even at times prods us toward the abundant life he has given to us. He sacrificed himself so that you and I can receive his love and care in this manner.

Most of us, I'm guessing, are big on the idea of being self-sufficient. I know I am. For many of us it's a matter of pride and hard work. And in truth we use our God given gifts to make a living and daily enjoy life as we are able.

Years ago I was talking with a gentleman my age. During our conversation about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm he said, "I don't know about you, Pastor, but the older I get, the more I want to live knowing and appreciating God's shepherding hand in my life. The longer I live I am more and more aware of God's hand leading and directing my efforts, trusting that I am growing into the person God would have me become."

I appreciate his words. And I suspect that for many followers of Christ there is no denying God's expertise as a shepherd. He keeps us on right paths, he nourishes us with the best and he is with us through the darkest moments of our lives. And in return we can indeed lead thankful lives daily.

And for all of us there is simply no denying that we need his constant shepherding. We are not and never will get it all correct each and every day. But then I believe God knew that when he signed on as our good shepherd.

He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Thanks be to God. Amen

## **Prayers of Intercession**

*The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.*

Alive in the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we bring our prayers before God who promises to hear us and answer in steadfast love.

*A brief silence.*

Loving Shepherd, you know your own and your own know you. Your voice calls us to your loving embrace. Strengthen your church throughout the world that we bear witness to your expansive love. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Gracious Shepherd, you are generous with the gifts of goodness and mercy. Restore your creation to wholeness so that cities and towns, countryside and wilderness, may abound with life. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Hope-giving Shepherd, the nations and peoples are your heritage. Place into the hearts of all leaders and rulers the passion to serve. Crucify any desire to overpower others and give leaders joy in lifting up the lowly. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Abiding Shepherd, your love flows as we reach out to those around us. Move us with your Spirit, so that we lay down our lives for those in need (*especially*). Help us love one another in truth and action. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Saving Shepherd, you restore us to wholeness. Help our community in our life together and give us vigor as a people of faith. In the midst of challenges and opportunities (*specific concerns may be named*), fill us anew with you Holy Spirit. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

*Here other intercessions may be offered.*

Eternal Shepherd, you hold us securely in your loving hands. In the assurance of resurrection hope, we remember our loved ones who have died in you (*especially the evangelist Mark*). Bring us, with them, to dwell in your house forever. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

In the hope of new life in Christ, we raise our prayers to you, trusting in your never-ending goodness and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**