

Sermon – John 10:11-18; Psalm 23

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Grace Lutheran Church

4 Easter – Year B

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“Crossing the Valley”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

1. As you may know, I’m one of the assistant coaches for Torsten’s t-ball team, the Vipers. While I watch a lot of baseball, I didn’t play much when I was a kid. I don’t really have a lot to offer in terms of technique or strategy, so those things fall to the other coaches. I’ve decided that my job is to be as encouraging as possible, taking the time to know each boy by name; taking care to point out what they’ve done well. Amazingly, my young charges have conferred upon me a mantle of authority. They seem to think that I know what I’m doing. But baseball is a complicated game, and explaining things only gets you so far. Much better to show them. *This* is how you field a ground ball. *This* is how you throw to first. *This* is how you stop rolling around in the outfield grass or drawing pictures in the dirt with a stick when you’re supposed to be paying attention. At a practice early in the season, one young boy, having found himself as a baserunner standing on third, looked up at me and said, “Coach? I have no idea what I’m supposed to be doing.” My first thought was that this was a pretty deep existential confession for a six-year-old. My second, and much more correct, thought was that he simply didn’t know where to go next. So, I told him, and then I showed him. *This* is the direction you run to make it safely home.

2. *I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing. How do I make it safely home?*

These are the concerns at the heart of our readings today. Psalm 23 is among the most well-known and well-loved passages of scripture, filled with images of peace and calm, of abundance and hope. But in the center of the psalm is a chasm, a valley of death dotted with enemies and evil. Surely, we can relate, we who live in this world where pandemics rage and evil thrives, in this city where a seven-year-old girl – a girl no older than the kids I coach – is shot and killed in a McDonald's drive-thru. What are we supposed to do in the face of such suffering, evil, and death? How will we make it safely home?

3. Near the end of his public ministry, not long before his crucifixion, Jesus draws upon this psalm to give voice to his own identity and mission. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. Starting with this *I AM*, Jesus evokes memories of the burning bush., of Moses's encounter with the God who says, "I am who I am." Jesus wants us to know that he is who he is, that he is God. And if God, then good. "I am the Good Shepherd," he proclaims, drawing us into the 23rd psalm that we may discover his presence and discern his voice in our lives. Jesus takes for his own the active, relational, personal language of the psalm, that we might come to know him as the One who keeps us from want and leads us, who restores our souls and feeds us. He does so as the One who enters the valley with us. God does not promise here that, because we have a Good Shepherd, we will never know evil or have enemies; God does not promise a shortcut around the valley of death. Instead, the Good Shepherd promises to journey with us.

4. As a suburban kid who lives several steps removed from an agrarian, pastoral life, I'm hardly an expert in these matters. But my understanding is that sheep are not stupid animals. Quite the contrary. You can't push and prod them, expecting them to go where you want them to go. You can do so with cows, but sheep will just run around to get back behind you. Sheep, you see, do not want to be pushed. They want to be led. They don't need to be

- told where to go; they need to be shown where to go. Sheep are smart enough to go somewhere only when someone they trust has gone there first. Sheep need a shepherd and, if they're going to have a chance, they need a good one. One who will lead them. One who will point them home.
5. We live in the valley of the shadow of death; try as we might, there is no use denying it. We have to go there, but who would want to? As it turns out, Jesus would. Jesus knows that we must face death. He is well aware of the fact that, in fear of our own mortality, we have created systems and reinforced structures that impose death upon others. These wolves stalk us, some quickly through violence, others slowly through deprivation and alienation. But the wolves come. The valley's shadow lengthens. There is no way around it. What does the Shepherd do? He enters in.
 6. Now we come to the heart of it. The difference between Jesus the Good Shepherd and a hired hand is that Jesus is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. Five times in today's passage Jesus makes the point: He has come to lay down his life. If there is no way around the valley of the shadow of death, then we must go through it. But we do not go alone. The One who knows our name, the great I Am, the very Word of God, has come to lead the way. He does not stand behind us to push or prod; neither does he wait on the other side for us to make it through on our own, as if we could. No. Jesus – knowing that we will die, knowing that we are dead already under the weight of sin – Jesus leads the way. In order that no beloved sheep may be lost; to keep the flock ever expanding beyond the barriers we impose; Jesus dies for us. He lays down his life and he takes it up again. Robert Farrar Capon writes, "He proclaims, in other words, that his death is the operative device by which the reconciling judgment of God works – that the crucifixion is God's last word on the subject of sin, the final sentence that will make the world one flock under one gracious shepherd." We may not know what we're doing or where we're going, but our Shepherd does. He comes to die that we may live. We may not

- know how to make it safely home, but Jesus does. He has gone on ahead of us through this valley, making safe our way across by the power of his cross. Now he journeys with us, calling us each by name with the unmistakable voice of the One who loves us enough to lay down his life for us.
7. As Jesus laid down his life for us, we, too, are called to lay down our lives for one another. John calls us to this work in his first epistle, asking, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or a sister in need and yet refuses to help?” How indeed? But how do we do this work? We are not the Shepherd. We are little sheep, little children, with little power of our own. What can we do? A few days ago, the final episode of Marvel’s superhero series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* was released. The show tackles head on the long history of racial injustice in America and the plight of refugees suffering in a world that cares too little. Sam Wilson, one of the two titular heroes, differs from many of the superheroes who populate this fictional universe. He’s an ordinary guy; he has no special powers conveyed by gamma rays or experiments gone wrong. But he takes up the fight for justice and equity anyway. No spoilers, but in a climatic scene Sam stares down the powers that be and says, “The only power I have is that I believe we can do better.” We are not the Shepherd; we are just sheep. But we are sheep who know Jesus’ voice, the flock who follows where he leads. And friends, we can do so much better for our sisters and brothers in need. We begin by following the Shepherd, who leads us always out of death to life, from want to abundance, from separation into the single flock with room enough for all people. Joined together, the Shepherd calls us to the good work of caring for our fellow sheep.
 8. We, of course, will continue to go astray. That’s what sheep do. But the Shepherd’s voice calls out as he leads the way. His twin sheepdogs, goodness and mercy, come close behind, restoring us always to abundance and grace. Marked with the indelible waters of baptism, we belong to Christ, and he will

not lose us. We have a home with him forever, and Christ makes his home with us now, in this world, setting for us a feast in the face of our troubles. The table of God's grace overflows with good things, both to meet our physical needs and to set us free from the powers of sin, evil, and death itself. What are we to do? How will we make it home? Follow me, the Shepherd speaks. Follow me, out of death and into the verdant pastures and still waters of life abundant. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.