

Good Shepherd Sunday – April 21, 2024

Homily from Deacon Kim

Quick quiz: What is special about this Sunday?

The 4th Sunday of Easter traditionally features Jesus as the Good Shepherd and also is kept annually as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. I've heard this Sunday referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday in the past because the readings pretty much focus on a description of what makes a shepherd good.

"The Lord is my Shepherd"... Psalm 23 is probably THE most well-known of all the Psalms and is frequently a request for Celebration of Life services. What is it about this Psalm that has resonated with people for centuries? Today, I thought we might take a closer look. Follow along with me in your bulletin.

When David states, "The Lord is my shepherd," he knows from experience exactly what he is saying. He declares that the Lord is watching over him just as he once watched over his family's flocks. He clarifies for us what is included in the Lord's shepherding: 1) We will not hunger, there is no "want" that is not satisfied. The NIV version translates as "I lack nothing." It reminds me that humankind does not live by bread alone. 2) We will rest in green pastures — soft, fragrant, and tasty; helping us to cultivate a non-anxious presence. 3) We will drink from quiet brooks or lakes rather than having to negotiate muddy access to raging streams or crowd around stagnant pools. We shall not thirst. That takes care of the basic physical and spiritual needs.

Now David moves deeper into his and our emotional and spiritual health and this is where our Shepherd Lord excels. 1) We are guided along the right paths for the Lord's namesake." To me, that means if we follow our Good Shepherd we can avoid the pitfalls associated with unhealthy or even dangerous decisions. 2) The Lord is with us even when all nature rises against us, even when evil surrounds us. We need never fear that the Lord will abandon us to save himself. 3) The shepherd's "rod and staff," which I interpret as Scripture and Prayer, bring comfort to us. They are the Lord's tools for guidance and also protection.

The final verses carry us through this life and into the safety offered by the Lord's dwelling place. A table is prepared for us in the midst of all the chaos raging around us, an opportunity to be fed with food that is not of this world. We are treated as honored guests at this banquet, and the love of God overflows within us. Faced with all that our Good Shepherd does for us, we are assured that his goodness and mercy will be with us always and he will lead us into the house of the Lord where we will live forever, lacking nothing.

No wonder this Psalm is so popular! The reassurance and comfort that these words convey conjure up the peace and tranquility of a life that we can have **now** with Jesus as our Shepherd AND the life that awaits us when Jesus guides us to our eternal home.

In the Gospel reading from John today, we learn that Jesus tries not once but 3 times to get the Jewish people and religious leaders to recognize him as The Lord and Shepherd that David describes. He comes right out and declares, “I **AM** the Good Shepherd”!

In his sermon to the religious leaders, Jesus uses the identity of a good shepherd to teach them how to care for the people of Israel. In this agri-society, most (if not all) of the people listening to Jesus would have understood the role of a shepherd. Many would have been in charge of shepherding family flocks when they were kids themselves. And yet, the occupation of shepherd was the lowest rung on the social ladder. Jesus emphasizes the selflessness, loneliness, and courage needed to tend those placed in a good shepherd's care.

This was a great responsibility for a young child and they took their role seriously – their own future depended on it. The wealth of a family was often represented by their flocks and herds. When Jesus instructs the religious leaders on their role of caring for the people, he uses himself as an example. He spells out what a good shepherd is and the trust that develops over time between a good shepherd and his/her flock. He tells them the extent a good shepherd must be prepared to go through in caring for his/her sheep. And he challenges them – a good shepherd must be willing to give up his/her own life (and lifestyle) to protect those who have been given into his/her care.

David told us what is expected of a good shepherd. Jesus showed us. As clergy, we are expected to shepherd the people of our congregations, community, and all those God has placed in our care (though not necessarily from our sheep pen). For me, that means not only the people of St. Matthews but also the friends made at every congregation I have served in the past. That relationship doesn't go away simply because I moved locations.

In addition, I also shepherd those in prison, those released from prison, their families, and others who help serve those affected by incarceration here in Arizona. Thankfully I have not been asked to lay down my life for those God has placed in my care, but I have laid down my lifestyle. I've made sacrifices of family and personal time in order to be with those who need shepherding. I am not alone either. Fr. Rick and all those called to a servant ministry do the same.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this homily, this Good Shepherd Sunday includes the annual World Day of Prayer for those serving in the vocation of shepherd. We are asked to pray especially that the Church may be provided with the good leaders needed to do its work of spreading the Gospel (using words if necessary!). However, according to 1 Peter 5:2 (*which I think should have been the 2nd reading for today, I need to write to the lectionary police about this*), **everyone** is called to “be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care...”; it's not just the responsibility of clergy.

When we were baptized, we agreed to proclaim by word and example the Good News, we agreed to seek and serve Christ in all persons, we agreed to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being. We basically agreed to become good shepherds.

When we became parents, our family became our flock. What parent hasn't made sacrifices for their children or adult child hasn't made sacrifices for family or their elderly parents. Many who served in the military and other dangerous careers have actually sacrificed their lives for their flocks.

Caregivers, counselors, teachers, social workers, even politicians...the list goes on and on of those who are called to be good shepherds of the flock God placed into their care. It's not limited or restricted by anything except, as Peter describes, that we be "willing as God wants you to be...eager to serve." Our flocks may change since God shifts them around periodically as needed for their sake and for ours. Our experiences with these different flocks prepare us for the next group and so on. As long as we are willing and eager to serve, God will provide flocks for us to tend.

Therefore, since ALL of us have served as shepherds in our lifetime this prayer on World Day of Prayer for Vocations is for everyone. Let us pray... "Father, thank you for giving us many examples of a healthy relationship between a Shepherd and their flock. Give us an attentive ear so we may hear your call. Help us to trust in your leading and give us the courage to walk in your ways. May you always be our Lord, the Good Shepherd, and may we be like sheep who listen and follow." **Amen.**