

4.21.2024 Easter 4

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

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

“One shepherd, one flock”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

John’s gospel contains the seven well-known “I am” statements by Jesus: “I am” the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12), the gate of the sheep (10:7, 9), the good shepherd (10:11, 14), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6), and the true vine (15:1).

In today’s gospel Jesus says, *“I am the good shepherd...I lay down my life for the sheep.”* With these words, Jesus is describing his relationship to all of humanity. Jesus is the good shepherd gathering all nations and people of this world into one flock.

In a world continually marred by division and war in which nations, groups, and individuals clash with one another, Jesus’ words challenge us to see the wideness of God’s love for this world. In a world where people set themselves up as leaders of competing factions, Jesus reminds us that his voice seeks to unite, rather than divide, humanity into one flock. Jesus’ words as the good shepherd are not simply a feel-good “Hallmark Card” greeting; rather, Jesus is the vision and reality to overcoming the world’s divisions with unity and peace.

If you have ever worshiped in another country or in another church than your own and experienced the welcome of fellow sisters and brothers in another language, ethnicity, or culture, you have already experienced Jesus’ words. Christ’s body the church is one flock of global fellowship centered around Jesus Christ the good shepherd.

As a college student, I remember worshiping in Guangzhou China in a church filled to the rafters, hearing familiar hymns and praying the Lord’s Prayer alongside of Chinese voices. In the international city of Hong Kong, I worshiped at an appropriately named Lutheran congregation, “The Church of All Nations.” One sunny summer morning in Windemere England, my wife and I worshiped in a Methodist church led by a woman pastor, and though we were travelers, we were welcomed as a sister and a brother in Christ. In Japan, I taught at the Lutheran seminary and served as a pastor in Japanese language congregations. One of these congregations was in an international port city named Ube, and frequently crew members from commercial ships that docked there would come to worship on Sunday morning. I would translate my Japanese sermon into English, and the members of the congregation welcomed

these strangers into our fellowship with Christ the good shepherd at the center.

I tell you these stories to illustrate what Jesus continues to do in this world: he makes one flock of many nations, one flock of diverse people. For this Jesus came into the world, to reveal God's love for this world as the good shepherd who leads humanity to living waters of baptism that continue to restore the divine image in all people. Jesus leads humanity in every language in right paths for his name's sake, and he leads us through life's darkest valleys, constantly with us, and though we may waver or even leave him, he never leaves us.

As modern urban people, though we are familiar with the image of the "good shepherd," shepherds and sheep are not often a daily occurrence in our lives. Yet, the theme of the "good shepherd" was well-known in the ancient world. It was an image that anyone would have understood, whether they were Hebrew, Greek, or Roman, whether they were African or Asian. Even the English word, "pastor" comes from the Latin word *pastor*, meaning "shepherd." Though modern pastors wear a lot of hats in a congregation, their primary role is to be a shepherd, crossing boundaries and seeking to protect and unite all people.

Yet shepherding is also a way that Jesus is working through each of you. Perhaps you might call to mind someone who walked alongside of you in a time of grief, illness or doubt; perhaps someone who led you when you were in a dark place or fed you with compassion at a time when you were feeling lost or unworthy.

Jesus lays down his life for the sheep. He works through people who lay down what is going on in their lives to sacrifice for and help one another. He needs your hands and voices. When I was a pastor in Japan, I remember one church member named Takeo Yamamoto. In his career as an English teacher in the local high school, Mr. Yamamoto had taught generations of students. He was also a founding member of the church that I served as pastor, and yet before I arrived, there was a time when this church had grown so small that they no longer had a pastor, and the synod was considering closing it. So, Mr. Yamamoto went to the synod assembly, stood up, and advocated as a shepherd for his church. That church remains open today, thriving as the only church in the county.

The point I am making is that to be a Christian is to know and be led by the voice of Jesus the good shepherd. Each of you knows someone in your life who has been a good shepherd to you, someone who has been Jesus to you. Jesus is leading you so that you might lead and be Jesus to others.

1 John tells us, “*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*” This is how Jesus gathers us into one flock, by living for others who are different from us. Yet there are also other voices in this world pretending to be shepherds, calling us to follow them rather than Jesus. These other voices tell us who to accept and who to exclude. These voices say they have our back and will care for us, yet these voices also seek to divide humanity into groups fighting against one another. They are the voices of the hired hands who run away and leave the flock when they sense danger.

Only Jesus the good shepherd goes beyond the boundaries that divide humanity. Jesus goes beyond national, cultural, religious, and political boundaries to gather humanity into one flock. He is the universal love of the Father for this world.

Jesus gathers us from different nations, ethnicities, genders, and identities. His voice proclaims God’s love for you, and he calls his church to go beyond the human-made boundaries that separate people from one another. His church is one flock of many nations and peoples. As we walk among people of different faiths, Jesus shares his love with them through you.

How is Jesus leading you walk alongside of others? How is he shepherding you to live for others in a diverse and plural world?

Listen to the voice of the good shepherd, he will lead you to living water; he will walk with you through life’s dark valleys; he will prepare a table before you so that strangers and enemies might become friends. He has called you and your neighbor beloved children of God.

Follow him and his mercy and goodness will follow you all the days of your life. Amen.