

Stray Sheep

Easter People: Part 2 “Stray Sheep”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – April 30, 2023

4th Sunday of Easter

Readings: 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-18

Reflection: Psalm 23

Greeting: Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

Prayer: Lord of Life, submitting to death, you conquered the grave. By being lifted on a cross you draw all peoples to you. By being raised from the dead you restored to humanity all that we had lost through sin. Throughout these fifty days of Easter, we proclaim the marvelous mystery of death and resurrection. For all praise is yours, now and forever. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 23

I The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though 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.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. (Psalm 23 KJV)

We read the words of Psalm 23 and hear of God’s care and compassion. That the Lord is with us in times of trouble and in times of peace. That God is there to help us and comfort us. That we find goodness in the love of the Lord. How have you experienced God’s love? How do you celebrate God’s care in your life? How do you invite others to share in God’s grace? How can we come together and celebrate God’s incredible love? How has your life been changed because of Christ’s death and resurrection?

Prayer: O God, our shepherd, our gate, our lamb: In the resurrection of your Son you have brought us into your pasture. Guide us to clear streams, and tame the wolf at our gate. We thank you for all you have already done and the great love that has been shown to us. We lift

up our joys and our concerns, bringing all things before you. May we experience your grace in our laughter and our tears. May you strengthen us in sorrow and in celebration, knowing you are with us. And may you guide us in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Alleluia.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 19 through 25.

For it is a commendable thing if, being aware of God, a person endures pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do good and suffer for it, this is a commendable thing before God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:19-25 NRSV)*

Our next reading comes from John chapter 10 verse 1 through 18.

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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." (John 10:1-18 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Today's reading gives us a little bit about shepherds, sheep gates, and stray sheep. This can be a little confusing when we first walk through this because Jesus describes himself both as the gate and as the shepherd. We then can be left wondering exactly who it is he's talking about when he talks about a thief among the sheep. And with the different comparisons happening, it can get muddled up. And I wanted to try to clear up a little bit of the confusion that can sometimes surround this reading. Peter refers to us as stray sheep that return to the shepherd. There he is clearly referring to Christ as the shepherd, the guardian of our souls that keeps us from going astray. That we have been healed by this good shepherd. Shepherd analogies are common in the Bible, and they help to inform us of what Jesus is saying in our gospel reading for today. And because those analogies were well known, it also informs us as to why Jesus would have expected those around him to understand what he was saying. We see them in the writings of the prophets, and we hear them in the Psalms.

. And so, when we step into our reading from John, we have Jesus addressing the people. But we actually are stepping into the middle of an event. To understand this better, it helps to give this reading some context. If we reach back a few weeks, we might remember we talked about the man born blind that Jesus healed. This is right after Jesus has found the man that had been healed and is confronted by some Pharisees. There is not a break between the man who was born blind and Jesus talking about the sheep gate. That connection can get left out when we aren't reading through the whole gospel at once. So, if you remember that account, the man who had been healed had been having nothing but trouble with the religious experts. So, when we are looking for who Jesus is talking about, we see that he is criticizing the authorities again. That he is saying that those in charge aren't really caring for the people. They are just enjoying a position of power. That people can recognize when they aren't actually being cared for. The sheep know the shepherd, and when one who isn't the shepherd comes calling, the sheep won't follow. The one that enters by the gate is the shepherd. But the people are still a little confused at this point. So, Jesus tries again. This time, Jesus declares that he himself is the gate. Jesus then says that everyone that came before him was a thief or a bandit. Who is Jesus referring to at this point? He's still talking about those religious experts. That it is the Pharisees that have been pretending to shepherd the people while really just taking advantage of them. They haven't been doing God's work but have only been helping themselves. They are the ones who don't enter by the gate and who don't care about others. And it is true, because time and again we see those in power taking advantage of others. Even his harsh words about how they came to steal and to kill. But right after this, they attempt to stone Jesus to death because of his words. It is the religious leaders that have been taking advantage of the poor with the money changers at the temple. And they also destroy, because we have seen time and again that those who hold onto power unjustly do so by destroying hope. But Jesus declares he is the gate that allows the sheep to find pasture. That Jesus came not to abuse and take advantage of people, but he came that they could have life and have it abundantly.

Because Jesus is the good shepherd. Which adds to some of the confusion we can get with today's readings. Because we have those going in by the gate, that Jesus is the gate, and now Jesus is the shepherd! But each one has a different purpose and meaning, and Jesus goes through them all because he is all of those things. Jesus was the gate because he was the one that kept people who weren't the shepherd away from the sheep. But now Jesus is the shepherd. Why? Because the good shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. That is an incredibly poignant statement. Because it's the one who truly does care about the sheep that will do everything to protect them. The hired hand? The hired hand runs away. And who is the hired hand? Those in positions of power who are there for their benefit alone. It is the religious authorities who simply want to be seen as righteous but don't actually want to do God's will. It is the people who take advantage of the least and the last. Once it's not safe for them, they abandon the people they're supposed to be caring for. Because they don't care. They're just in it for what benefits them. But the good shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know him. And we get another statement here that helps to tie all this in with Easter. "I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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." And with that we have this concept here that Christ offers his life freely so that we may have life and have it abundantly. Those who have come to kill, steal, and destroy can do nothing to him because he lays down his life of his own accord to demonstrate God's love. To demonstrate the love of a good shepherd caring for his sheep. This is a powerful message because it's a reminder that the crucifixion and the resurrection tie into this image we have of the good shepherd. That the good shepherd, Christ, is the one who cares for us. Not because there's something in it for him but because of the great love that he has. The great love that God has for all of us is demonstrated through Christ's care in his death and his resurrection.

We should know when we are being led astray. Because they're only going to lead us into things that will benefit them. They don't care about our wellbeing. They don't care about nurturing our souls. They aren't interested in doing what is best for everyone. It's not about bringing people together in love. It's not about uniting them in hope. It's all about what they can get for themselves. And we have seen it in political leaders. And we have seen it in religious leaders. And we see it all over the place. Some people are only after what they can get for themselves. And that can be disheartening. So, it is then that we have to remember that we still know who the good shepherd is. And because we know the good shepherd, we can emulate that behavior. We learn that Christ is both gate and shepherd, because Christ protects us and watches over us wherever we are. Because Christ is always on our side and is always there for us. And he will be there to help us to call others to the flock. Because part of our call is to lead people to the gate, to Christ. We welcome them so that they may be welcomed in hope. That they may be welcomed into security. That they may be welcomed into peace. That they may have life and have it abundantly. And that when we extend God's invitation to the table, we offer it freely as it has been freely offered to us. That we welcome them in because we know the loving shepherd that guides us and want others to experience that love and grace.

And so it is that this very mixed metaphor brings us hope. Because we know the one who watches the gate, the one who is the gate, and the one who is the shepherd. That we know the flock and are of the flock. And that we can understand that this comes down to love. When we genuinely love one another, we experience God's powerful and genuine love for us. That when we share God's love with others, it grows so that we become one people, one flock. Not separating ourselves and trying to keep from being with each other. Not from trying to find infinite ways to divide ourselves up into smaller and smaller groups. Because the more we divide ourselves the harder it is for us to remember that the good shepherd has called us to be of one flock. That we are called to be joined together in Christ's care. That we are drawn together by the God who loves us. That we are redeemed in one blood by the shepherd who would freely lay down his life in love for us. And that he takes it up again so that we may be freed from slavery to sin and death. That his example for us is that we have been given a chance to live and to have life abundantly. And so it is that we follow Christ as Easter people. We acknowledge that his death is a sign of God's great and unending love for his children. That it is something that Christ did freely so that we could know that love and that we would experience that love. That we would share that love with others so that they would know that they are welcome into Christ's fold. We share so that all can celebrate this hope. That we have the hope that Easter gives us because we know that the good shepherd would never leave us on our own. That even when we have gone astray that he will find us to bring us back in love. That he is always with us to give us safety and security. That we may know peace because of his watchfulness. We may know hope in his care. And that we may invite others to share in this love, all so that we may have life and have it abundantly through Jesus Christ, our shepherd and our savior. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Easter People

Our current series looks at how we live as people who are forever changed by the Easter miracle. Each week we explore another aspect of how our lives are changed because of Christ and how we are called to live as Easter people.

April 23rd – Eyes Open – 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

April 30th – Stray Sheep – 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-18

May 7th – Finding the Way – 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

May 14th – One in Love – 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

May 21st – Yours, Mine, and Ours – 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup	Ambulance Crew	Our Healthcare Workers	Eric Veach
Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney
Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart
Phyllis Gabel	Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor
Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr
Jane Williams	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks
Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz	Donna Carlen
Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser	Corine Howard
Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Connie Brown	Jack Pitcher
Don Blade	Leo Westjohn	Marsha Overton	Darin Pease
Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Larry Heueman	Paul Cox
Family of Raymond Shook	Taylor Waldorf	Harriet Tucker	Becky McGuiness
Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson
Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter
Paul Schulte	Lavon Figgins	Kara Newton	

Rev Camron D St. Michael

<https://stmichael.pw>

cdstmichael@outlook.com

(316)530-3182 (call or text)

PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

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