

John 10:11-18

Jesus proclaims himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and takes it up again.

"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."

The idea of Jesus as the good shepherd, is one of John's especially memorable moments that tend to be remembered out of context. While it can have in memory a warm, gentle glow of safety and warmth about it, this discourse actually emerges out of a conflict with the religious authorities in John 9, and the conflict and related discourse are flanked by attempts to stone Jesus (John 8:59; 10:31).

John 10 begins in the middle of a quotation that has started at John 9:41. Jesus is continuing a conflict with the religious authorities, which they have started with the man born blind after Jesus has restored the man's sight. When the authorities cast the man out, Jesus finds him and receives him as his own - his "sheep" in the rhetorical landscape of John 10. The man born blind receives not only physical sight but also spiritual insight, while Jesus tells the powerful opponents that in their insistence that they are able to see, they remain spiritually blind. He illustrates the conflict of John 9 in John 10 with the contrasting images of the true, good shepherd, on the one hand, and the thieves and bandits who oppose him on the other; the false shepherds, who do not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climb in by another way, do not have the best interests of the sheep at heart; they steal, kill, and destroy, while Jesus, who is metaphorically both the door to the sheepfold and the shepherd of the sheep, offers abundant life. The goodness of the true shepherd comes at a cost. The shepherd lays down his life. The phrase is repeated five times in these nine verses and suggests a division of the passage into three parts. *(Meda Stamper, Working Preacher)*

COCU34B.Easter4B.Readings

If the Easter season is about anything, it's about restoration, life, and God's compassionate care for God's people. These are the themes that come through the readings for this week. In Acts the disciples, who are put on trial for healing the lame man outside of the Temple, proudly proclaim Jesus as the name by which the healing has happened, and by which humanity is to be saved. Psalm 23 celebrates God's care as shepherd, and in John's letter the love of God revealed in Christ's sacrifice is to be passed on through those who are Christ's disciples as they choose to love one another and lay down their lives for one another. Jesus proclaims himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep with commitment and courage, and who lays down his life for the sheep. It is the hope of resurrection that makes sacrifice possible, and that gives us the strength and courage to risk loving and serving others even when it hurts.

There are two obvious implications in today's theme that present themselves. The first relates to the crucial issue of leadership. The realities of corruption, incivility, self-interest, and petty partisanship are present in pretty much every government in the world. In the corporate sector, greed, quick-fixes, and profit-above-all-else easily taint leaders. Even in the sphere of the church, the temptation to seek fame, wealth, and influence too often takes precedence over compassionate and strong leadership. Like the people of Israel in Jesus' time, we long for Good Shepherds who lead with grace, compassion, wisdom, and justice. For those of us who exercise leadership in any capacity, the Easter vision calls us to use our influence to bring life to others, to serve others, and to work sacrificially for the good of our communities. It is this leadership alone that can make a positive difference to the great crises of our time at every level.

The second implication of today's theme flows from this leadership challenge. It's the call to recognise that resurrection life is not just a gift for personal blessing, but is a powerful energy that is intended to flow between people, bringing life, wholeness, and justice wherever it flows. As such, the call to love one another sacrificially applies not just to those in leadership, but to every Christ-follower. The resurrection life we celebrate is meant to connect us with others and motivate us to seek their best, contributing in whatever way we can to a world of grace, peace, justice and love. As we seek to live Christ's resurrected life together, our care and compassion has the potential to address every crisis from poverty to climate change. All it takes is the vision and hope, the courage and commitment and the faith to follow the movement of God's Spirit and the life that God's Spirit brings.

(John van de Laar, Sacredise)

Acts 4: 5-12

Peter and the other disciples are put on trial by the religious leaders, who ask them by which name or power they have healed the lame man. Peter, in response, tells them that it is by the power of Jesus that the healing has happened. Though they rejected Jesus, he has become "the cornerstone" and is the name through which humanity is saved.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, 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, 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. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

The establishing, negotiating, and naming of power and acts of power is inherently political and very often religious. The Jewish leaders had held the apostles in custody overnight, and the following day they summoned Peter and John to interrogate them. Like the leaders and the people, Peter and John are devout Jews, as well as disciples commissioned by Jesus who himself was a loyal worshipper of YHWH. The leaders want to know the source and authority of their power to heal a man crippled from birth, arising from a concern about the potential emergence of a rival "power," "name," or a new Jewish sect that might threaten the status quo (cf. 28:22). The leaders do not assume that the miracle occurred by the power of or in the name of YHWH, despite the fact that all of them are worshipers of YHWH. Religious folks who have confused the power of position with the power of God are more likely to reject the power of God operating in others who lack similar position and rank (cf. 4:13), despite how God might use them. We should maintain some humility considering our fallibility, mortality or human condition no matter how high we might climb in institutions. Those same religious folks might misguidedly attribute God's miracles to some other power or name that is antithetical to God. Many would not

believe that God was active in and through Jesus of Nazareth; it did not fit with their constructed theologies. *(Mitzi J. Smith, Working Preacher)*

Psalm 23

David celebrates God as his shepherd who provides for him, cares for him, protects him, and in whose house he will live forever.

O my Beloved, You are my shepherd, I shall not want;

You bring me to green pastures for rest and lead me beside still waters, renewing my spirit. You restore my soul. You lead me in the path of goodness to follow Love's way.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow and of death, I am not afraid; for You are ever with me; your rod and your staff they guide me, they give me strength and comfort.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of all my fears; you bless me with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the heart of the Beloved forever. Amen.

(Psalms for Praying: an Invitation to wholeness, by Nan C. Merrill)

1 John 3:16-24

As Jesus laid down his life for us we should lay down our lives for each other. We are called to follow God's command to love one another – in action, not just in word.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 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. 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.