



Good Shepherd Sunday Devotion

May 3, 2020

*Find a quiet place by yourself or
with another and come to God.*

CALL TO WORSHIP

Awaken from your slumber, and bring your fears and anxieties into the presence of the Lord our God. Hear the call of our Shepherd, and allow his voice to lead from selfish ambition to the feast of grace. May the light of Christ shine into the hidden darkness of our lives and restore us for the service of the Lord. Come let us worship God.

OPENING PRAYER

Shepherding God, bring us into your fold. Lead us beside still waters and restore our souls. Help us see the way we should go, the way we should live. Help us hear your voice calling our name. Enliven this time of worship, that we may find true life as we join with others: praising your name, celebrating your great goodness, and sharing your love for all people. Amen.

HYMN: "All People That On Earth Do Dwell"

1 All peo - ple that on earth do dwell, sing
 2 Know that the Lord is God in - deed; with -
 3 O en - ter then his gates with praise; ap -
 4 For why? The Lord our God is good; his

to the Lord with cheer - ful voice; him serve with mirth, his
 out our aid he did us make; we are his folk; he
 proach with joy his courts un - to; praise, laud, and bless his
 mer - cy is for - ev - er sure; his truth at all times

praise forth tell. Come ye be - fore him and re - joice.
 doth us feed, and for his sheep he doth us take.
 name al - ways, for it is seem - ly so to do.
 firm - ly stood, and shall from age to age en - dure.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Shepherding God, be with us in our need. Like sheep who have gone astray—we have not heeded your voice, calling us to follow the right paths, beckoning us to lie down and be restored. We have acted as if our salvation lies in busyness and control. We do not want to be sheep—dependent on a shepherd for everything. We want to do it alone—to maintain our independence. Forgive us for rejecting your shepherding care and your love and guidance. Forgive us for our need to do it by ourselves, to be separate from the flock. Forgive us for doubting your presence in times of trouble. Forgive us our despair in the face of seemingly unrelenting evil and death. Lead us back to the path of life. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Jesus said, I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly. In so confessing, we have returned to the shepherd, the guardian of our souls who welcomes us with open arms and a glad heart. Know that the shepherd of our lives never abandons us, is always calling our name, and unfailingly loves and forgives us. Because Jesus died for us. Jesus forgives us. Jesus loves us. Jesus is good to us. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON: John 10:1-11 (from *The Message*)

¹⁻⁵ “Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he’s up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won’t follow a stranger’s voice but will scatter because they aren’t used to the sound of it.”

⁶⁻¹⁰ Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. “I’ll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

¹¹⁻¹³ “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary.

MEDITATION

Who is your favorite Super Hero? Many grew up with Superman aka Clark Kent. Personally, I grew up with Batman *and* Robin – Adam West and Burt Ward to be exact. Every Tuesday and Wednesday I would see how the “Caped Crusaders” would get Gotham City out of its next jam caused by one of the evil villains. Part one on Tuesday was observed from the TV in my own home, but at 7:30 on Wednesday, I was at my friend Dee’s house tuning in at the same “Bat Time” on the same “Bat Channel.” She had a color TV and I could see Robin in all of his red, green and yellow glory. Oh, Burt Ward, I had your picture cut out from the TV guide hung on the wall next to my bed which I kissed each night. But I digress.

Dee was Batman. I was Robin. Together we made quite the dynamic duo as we rode our bikes pretending to be riding in the Batmobile fighting crime. The crime we were fighting was usually my sister, aka “Cat Woman.” When she wasn’t around, we just rode around on the lookout for whichever criminals might be present in our neighborhood, Morningside. We kept things rather quiet except for the occasional burglar but they only came out at night and we were sound asleep when the bat signal surely appeared in the sky.

Batman, of course, wasn’t the first Super Hero. That title, according to the Guinness Book of World Records goes to “The Phantom,” created by Lee Falk, which was debuted in his own newspaper comic strip on February 17, 1936. The strip recounted the adventures of Kit Walker, who donned a mask and purple outfit to become The Phantom – aka “the ghost who walks.” Since then there have been scores of super heroes. Which is your favorite? Batman – or Robin? Superman, Wonder Woman? Whichever one is your favorite, the creation of super heroes evolved during times of crisis. The first villains in the comic books were hijackers, embezzlers and bank robbers. The 1930s was the era of Pretty Boy Floyd, Al Capone and other “gangsters.” Once the war came along, we felt a need for more patriotic heroes to fight Hitler and so the likes of Captain Marvel, Wonder Woman, “The Flash” and other more patriotic heroes were created. Did you know that Hitler banned American comic books during that time? Yet more heroes were created in the turbulent 60s. It wasn’t too long after the 3 Mile Island nuclear reactor meltdown happened that the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were created. What else could explain that phenomenon?

All these super heroes, fighting the forces of evil in their way, shared similar characteristics – they all had special super-human powers, were attractive and had the physique of Atlas – and no wonder. Like that particular Greek god, they saw themselves as carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. I mean, the Gotham City police force was virtually impotent when it came to confronting the forces of the criminal underworld. All the US military fighting power proved over and over to be almost anemic compared to the malevolent “bad guys.”

Each super hero became popular because they were just what the culture was longing for – someone to come in and fix “it,” vanquishing the foe so that the sun could come out tomorrow.

In 33AD (or thereabouts), the Jewish people had a longing for a super hero to “fix it” for them. They were going through a traumatic period – and had been for some time what with Roman occupation and oppression even from their own religious institution. Jewish purity laws, as they had been interpreted, were burdensome at best, especially to the poor and outcast – the blind, the disabled, the diseased, the widow to name but a few. These were the powerless who longed for a great power to come in and take over.

In today’s scripture we get Jesus’ description of himself as a kind of “super hero,” or actually the ultimate super hero, although I’m not sure he would have called himself that but he did call himself the Good Shepherd. The fourth Sunday after Easter each year is designated as the Good Shepherd Sunday. I think the compilers of the lectionary, the 3 year rotation cycle of Bible lessons that correspond to the church’s seasons, wanted to remind the followers of just what kind of super hero Jesus was and is. After all, rising from the dead, walking through walls, disappearing only to reappear sometime later, might give people the wrong idea of this “super hero.”

So we hear this self-imposed description from Jesus as being likened unto a shepherd. This passage is found immediately after Jesus heals a man born blind. It was believed that his condition was his punishment for his own disobedience toward God or the disobedience of his parents. The Jewish leaders completely reject that Jesus performed this miraculous act by power given to him by God especially since it was done on the Sabbath! As they saw it, either the man had been lying about his condition all along or this was a completely different man. Whichever, the man who had been born blind now healed was rejected by his neighbors and the religious leaders who drove him out of town. In essence, he was punished twice – born blind and therefore a social outcast – “healed” and even more of an outcast, pushed out of his community and family. Oh, where is the justice?

It was upon finding this one who was cast out that Jesus responds with a description of himself as the Good Shepherd. Repeatedly in John’s gospel, Jesus tries to explain to his listeners just who he is using what are known as the “I AM” sayings: “I am the gate of the sheep... I am the light of the world... I am the bread of life... I am the way, the truth and the life... I am the vine... I am the resurrection and the life... I am the Good Shepherd.” Jesus is always using metaphors, images to get his point across. Today we are focus on “I am the Good Shepherd.” When you stop and think about it, isn’t it odd that a carpenter by trade would use the image of a shepherd including when he is speaking to a group of fishermen disciples? No wonder they were confused. They knew fish, not sheep. But as with every other lesson Jesus teaches, he chooses his images and words carefully. So why a shepherd?

There have been many commentaries written about this image – how shepherds tend the sheep. How sheep are not very smart; how they are led rather than have them follow like cows will do. If a shepherd leads them up a steep cliff, so they will go. If the shepherd steps off the edge of said cliff—splat! You get the point. A shepherd also has his “weapons” – a crook or staff that can ward off any would-be attackers. With one of these in hand, the shepherd had the fearless of a super hero. During the time of Jesus, shepherd was also a common image for other important leaders, which is rather interesting in that shepherds were also ranked as social outcasts. Hanging around sheep day and night didn’t make you a much desired dinner guest. Know what I mean? The smell!

All of these reasons may have been part of Jesus’ decision to compare himself to this humble profession, but I think there is yet more to it. Jesus was a master of the Hebrew Scriptures. One very well-known scriptures was the 23rd Psalm whose popularity hasn’t diminished. In that Psalm we get peaceful images of green

pastures, still waters and restored souls. No doubt these were images Jesus wanted to conjure up in the minds of his listeners, but maybe there is one more thing about this Psalm. It is a Psalm that is thought to be authored by David who is said to be Israel's greatest king but who first and foremost was a shepherd.

David was the youngest and littlest of the eight sons of Jesse from the miniscule town of Bethlehem, the tiniest of the towns within the region of Judah. He was the one out tending the sheep while his big brothers went off to war against the Philistines. He was the one whose job on the battlefield was to bring sandwiches to the hungry Israelite warriors. He was the one who was laughed at when he volunteered to accept the challenge of the mighty giant Goliath. There was scrawny shepherd boy David standing before the gargantuan warrior. The kid didn't have a magic hammer, spider's web or gadget packed utility belt. He had his trusty slingshot to face down the gleaming bronze sword and shield of the towering, muscle-bound champion of evil.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd." I think Jesus chose this image because of David the shepherd. Of course it was understood that the Messiah would be a descendent of the shepherd king. Yes, David went on to be a great warrior, but Jesus didn't say, "I am the great warrior, I am the great conqueror." No, the David he aligns himself with is the shepherd David who would prove victorious over his enemies using something other than superhuman power and strength or extraordinary weapons.

It is shepherd David that wrote the 23rd Psalm. In this piece of scripture David addresses God as shepherd – his shepherd, not his Superman, Batman or Mighty Warrior, but shepherd, humble but powerful. The words found in this Psalm aren't all peace and tranquility. Much of it makes us think of someone who is experiencing distress or pressures. What they were we can't be certain but we are given some clues. When he speaks of not wanting, maybe the psalmist faces the pressure of lacking enough—enough to eat and drink, enough safety and shelter to live, enough money to pay for what is necessary.

He then writes, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, or the "valley of the shadow of death." This may refer to deep distress, extreme danger, or even death. Whatever the case, the Psalmist seems to be facing the most serious of situations with potentially dire consequences. This is picked up with the phrase "you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." The idea of enemy is a foe or someone or thing that vexes or harasses. It would seem that the psalmist is facing serious stress from more than one source. What to do? In the heat of this pressure cooker, the psalmist turns to the shepherd, the one who carries a slingshot and stones or a wooden staff and yet can vanquish the greatest of foes.

We are living in a time of a great number of stresses – the threat of contracting COVID-19 is but one of them. Parents are under stress from trying to be parent/teacher/provider for their children who just desperately need to get out of the house! Some are under stress from the necessity to go to work under unsafe or potentially hazardous conditions while others are under stress because they don't have work to go to due to loss of employment and the bills are piling up. Some are under stress because isolation is taking its toll in the form of depression and loneliness. Others are under stress because their own health or the health of a friend or loved one is suffering and medical or psychological treatment may or may not help. Some are stressed because spending so much time with a spouse, roommate or children is exposing them for who they truly are and are discovering that they don't like that other one so much. Many are stressed because they just can't find any toilet paper and other necessary items to sustain life.

Yes, we have a lot of threats against our welfare and we need, we desperately want, a super hero to come and fix it. Here's the question, which super hero will we seek? Will it be Superman or Wonder Woman or will it be a shepherd? If we are honest, I think we want Superman, Batman *or* Robin, but Jesus gives us a shepherd.

As a shepherd, the sheep in the flock – that's us – will be led, have basic needs cared for and will be defended from the harm of bad guys. All of that is similar to what our idea of the work of super heroes. But here's the big difference, the shepherd leads and sticks with the sheep. Superman flies in, does his strong-man thing and then flies off to the Fortress of Solitude. Batman roars up in the Batmobile, does battle then goes off to the bat-cave. But the shepherd never leaves the sheep. Even at night, when the darkness descends, always the most dangerous time, the shepherd lays down and actually becomes the gate over

which any dangerous element must climb in order to get at the sheep nestled in their pen. The sheep can count on the unfailing love and protection of the shepherd.

Theologian Leonard Sweet suggests that the power of shepherd comes from its use of two key words in this Psalm: though and through the same word except for a single letter "r." It is the one little letter that makes all the difference in the world. It is the letter that can turn your "though" into a "through."

The psalm's author, David, the innocent shepherd-boy, knew the truth behind that first word "though," as there are dangers lurking around every corner. There was no "if" about the reality of life's obstacles and problems. Psalm 23 candidly faces the inevitable. It proclaims not "if" but "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" Life isn't all loaded dining tables, overflowing cups or green pastures. Sometimes our hair isn't anointed with oil, but grimed with grease. Sometimes we're not lying in green pastures but flailing in blue Mondays. Sometimes we're not resting by the shore of still waters but struggling in isolation in the valley of the shadow.

Every one of us has a valley. "Though" none of us gets out of life without walking the valley, the psalmist makes it plain that God does not intend for us to sojourn there forever. The valley of the shadow is something one goes through. Valleys are not resting places, but passageways. We can walk through our problems. We can walk through our sorrows. We can walk through our pain. We can walk through our screw-ups. What Psalm 23 promises us is that, in all these journeys, the Lord will walk through with us.

"Though" and "through" differ only by one small letter the letter "r." In American Sign Language, "r" is made by crossing the middle finger over the index finger. But crossed fingers have a history as sign language that far pre dates ASL. In the first centuries of the Church, when Christianity was illegal and Christians were vigorously persecuted, believers found ways to communicate their faith in subtle ways. Accompanying a greeting or farewell, crossed fingers were a code sign, identifying Christians to one another as "people of the cross." The crossed fingers were a mute symbol for the cross of Christ and the redemption Christ's death on that cross brought to all people.

Today, crossed fingers mean something very different. When placed behind one's back, they mean that one doesn't mean what one is saying. When held in one's lap, they mean one is hoping something will or will not come to pass. Russ Chiodo, Director of Emergency Services for Beaver County, PA, was the person in charge of picking up the body parts from the 132 people who died on the ill-fated USAir Flight 427 that crashed on its way from Chicago to Pittsburgh back in 1994. When asked what it was like to bag body parts with no human faces left, Chiodo confessed to the sight that affected him the most. "The thing I'm not going to be able to forget for a long time is finding a hand with its fingers crossed-as if for luck."

It was the Christians who first invented "crossed fingers," and it had nothing to do with luck, and everything to do with trust in God, the Good Shepherd super hero whose weapon is the cross. This is what the crossed fingers of the letter "r," the difference that turns a "though" into a "through," still mean to the believer today.

Dr. Ralph Sockman once told a story about a lawyer in New York who took his son with him to walk around the streets of Manhattan. The streets were very crowded that day. The little boy started out holding onto his Father's finger. However, after being pushed and jostled and bumped by the crowd, the little boy grew tired and he said:

"Please, Dad, take hold of my hand now: I can't hold on much longer." Sometimes that's what we have to do. We entrust our troubles to God... and ask him to hold us up and get us through.

Though we may walk in the darkness of the valley of the shadow, we are not alone. God is with us. Walking through the valley with us is the one who suffered and died for our sake: The Crucified One. This is my super hero. I hope he is yours. Amen.

PRAYER

Loving Shepherd,
You lead and guide,

You walk alongside,
You prepare, you feed, you call,
all of your sheep,
even those of us who are lost,
those of us who stray constantly,
those of us who stay close to your comforting staff.

We are grateful for the lush green pastures of our lives,
and we pause now to offer our thanksgivings
for the goodnesses in our lives...

There are so many who walk in the shadows
of fear and suffering and despair,
and we pause now, to offer our prayers
for the broken and bleeding places in this world...

We also offer our prayers for the sheep of our own flocks,
in our families and friends,
in this our church and our community...(offer your prayers here)

O Loving Shepherd,
We have all we need,
as we live in You.
Amen.

HYMN: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"



1 *Great is thy faith - ful - ness, O God my Fa - ther;
 2 Sum - mer and win - ter, and spring - time and har - vest,
 3 Par - don for sin and a peace that en - dur - eth,

there is no shad - ow of turn - ing with thee.
 sun, moon, and stars in their cours - es a - bove
 thine own dear pres - ence to cheer and to guide,

Thou chang - est not; thy com - pas - sions they fail not.
 join with all na - ture in man - i - fold wit - ness
 strength for to - day and bright hope for to - mor - row:

As thou hast been thou for - ev - er wilt be.
 to thy great faith - ful - ness, mer - cy, and love.
 bless - ings all mine, with ten thou - sand be - side!

BENEDICTION

Day by day, God will lead us:
 to those pools of peace where we can
 care for our friends and strangers
 even from a safe distance.
 Day by day, Jesus will call us:
 to give ourselves in service,
 to anoint others with hope,
 to stay in the safe places
 for the good of all of God's people.
 Day by day, the Spirit shows us:
 the people we might be,
 the community we might become
 when once again we can gather.