

April 25, 2021  
Our Shepherd  
First Lutheran Church  
Pastor Joshua Graber

Grace and peace in the name of God our loving Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday we talked about having peace in God when we lie down at night, and this Sunday the Psalmist tells us to lie down in green pastures, the Epistle of First John tells us that Jesus lay down his life for us and in the Gospel for today Jesus again says that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. You know his soft, cuddly sheep? All this talk about laying down during church may be a very difficult temptation for those of you who have trouble paying attention during sermons and who are watching from a comfortable car seat or a couch or a bed! The message may talk about laying down but this is a very active message one that we should stay awake for! That's kind of the point!

We are the Beloved described by John, and the sheep that our shepherd is caring for, and Jesus is inviting us to abide with him more closely and John calls his audience and us, "Little children" and compels us to "love, not only in word and speech, but in truth and action!"

Jesus when he lays down his life is clear that this is not resigning himself to a fate carried out by other forces. He is choosing this as an act of power. Jesus says, "I lay down my life to take it up again, no one takes it away from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again."

A political leader recently talked about George Floyd sacrificing his life for justice, but many pointed out that George Floyd may have died, but did not choose this fate and that justice would be a world where Floyd did not die, not just someone being held accountable for the death. There are differences here with what Jesus is saying about his death as a shepherd.

Jesus cares about justice but death is not a just act. As I proclaimed during Holy Week it is easy to see Jesus dying as a sacrifice to our human feelings and desire for comfort, but his condemnation and death was not an act of justice by the Romans or Jewish authority though they made that claim. And in terms of what his death means for us, his sheep, it is not representative of justice. Justice would be for us to be condemned because we fall short. We deserve that fate but are saved from it.

First John asks, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother and sister in need and yet refuses to help?" Well, that is all of us, isn't it? And yet Jesus stands with us and constantly invites us deeper into that love and forgiveness. Jesus invites us, his little children, to love our siblings in Christ where we see the world falling short in its care for them. Our shepherd does not give up on us or on them, and that is incredibly good news for all of us. But Jesus does invite us into an active relationship with him, and John rightly asks how a person can claim to be in relationship with God when they are not in relationship with their neighbor, taking the love God has shown us and sharing that love as God's overflow into the world through our hands and feet. Just as the baptismal waters splash out of the font, God desires our baptized and forgiven lives to leap through boundaries and into the world to reach others with love.

John challenges us to see our relationship with God as one of love not fear and through that relationship asks— how can we do anything but love others, when we realize what Jesus has done for us. We are covered with a justice we do not deserve. We are covered with a forgiveness that we do not deserve. We are covered with a peace that we have not earned as Christ has, and yet Jesus lays all these gifts on us. They are our clothes like a sheep's wooly coat, covering us from danger and allowing us to share that love, that warmth, those clothes with others.

When I was a child, my parents adopted a lamb from a sheep farmer whose farm was near our house. My brother had gone through a young businessman phase and at the age of probably 9 or 10, decided that instead of putting his savings into a bank he would buy a sheep and learn to shear it and sell the wool for an annual profit higher than interest in a bank account. Meanwhile I was stealing loose dollars from the box my mom's kept her tips from waitressing in, to go buy a weekly stash of candy from the corner store, the only store on the only corner in our small town! My brother was a little different in this way and we loved him for it. I can't remember what brought the need or desire for a lamb adoption, maybe the mother had passed away, but the sheep farmer when through one circumstance or another, asked us to foster a baby lamb. So our family was wonderfully different during this time as well, as we were seen walking around town and I remember even going to some events with a lamb on a leash named Bleetz. The story is one that I love about my family that gives me a unique experience when it comes to lambs and sheep in the Bible, having cuddled up with a baby sheep often as a kid.

But the story doesn't end well. The formula that we thought had all the nutrients the baby lamb needed was missing a key ingredient from mother's milk and passed away. We tried but we were not very good shepherds or parents for this baby lamb.

The truth is that is our reality a lot of the time. We all fall short of our expectations and hopes in one way or another. But it reminds us that Jesus our true shepherd, fills in the gaps and loves us through our grieving and loss. And carries us like a baby lamb through this life and the next. On Wednesday, LaVerne Williams and I got to talk about the stained glass window of Jesus the shepherd which was moved from the previous church to this one and was an important memorial for a child who died when they were three. A symbol of remembrance that Jesus is with us in the difficult times and our loss and cares as a shepherd in this life and in the life to come.

I also think of our newest member of First Jeanie and the difficult news last week that her dog Benji passed away. He had health issues that we knew would eventually be too much for his little body, but this loving companion meant so much for Jeanie and was a friend of our community. Benji actually led Jeanie to us, when they came to the Pet Blessing in October. Benji loved church. Jeanie could say, "Do you want to go to church?" And Benji would be up at the door. Of course, some of that training may be because Barb always had a treat for him in the office! Benji will be missed.

Pets have a way of showing us the love God has for us and helping us share it with the world. They teach us care and companionship in ways that help us in other relationships. When people ask me if dogs go to heaven, I usually say, "Yeah I'm pretty sure dogs run heaven!" And there is some biblical basis for

that. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm that we said together today, which many of us may have grown up saying before we went to bed, the final line is, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever". The Hebrew word for follow here, is the same word that is used to describe the dogs herding cattle. They pursue and guide the sheep home. You can imagine in our life as sheep, having just enough goodness and mercy to keep us on the path remembering our relationship with our loving God. No matter what our travels, past running waters, mountains, green pastures, and dark valleys, with the reality of death casting its shadow, our Lord is with us and always invites us home into relationship with God that last longer than anything else. And when we abide in God we remember that home and take that love with us wherever we go and through whatever we go through. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is there to help us and guide us and invites us to love and support each other as he did.

May goodness and mercy, love and peace of Christ pursue you and lead you deeper into your relationship with your shepherd who leads us through and into the world! Amen.