



## *Fourth Sunday of Easter – ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’*

*May 3, 2020*

### *Introduction*

We continue to ‘shelter in place’ as protection from the corona virus. Most churches have not had public worship since March 15. This has been difficult for people who have made a life-long practice of worshiping together on Sundays. In normal circumstances, today would have marked the end of our Northeastern Minnesota Synod Assembly. Our plans were to elect and call a new bishop for our synod. At closing worship, Bishop Thomas Aitken would have delivered his final proclamation of the Gospel to the pastors and people of our Synod. But such is not the case; the pandemic has changed everything. Bishop Aitken will continue in office until we can gather and elect his successor. I am thankful for his continuing ministry to our pastors and our congregations.

The office of bishop is important to the wellbeing the Church. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America there are sixty-five synodical bishops. The Churchwide assembly elects a Presiding Bishop. That office is currently held by Bishop Elizabeth Eaton.

I have known Bishop Aitken for a long time and regard him as a friend. The office of bishop in the traditional understanding is a ‘symbol of unity.’ Bishops are both called to serve in the office and the call is ratified [perhaps recognized might be a better word] through the election process. The bishop serves as ‘pastor’ to the pastors and to the congregations in his/her synod. The bishop is responsible for speaking publicly for the church in matters of faith, ethics, and ministry. Bishops also have the responsibility to ensure that the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered. Congregations receive pastoral candidates from the office of the bishop as they continue their ministries in their communities. Bishop Aitken oversees the ministry of more than 130 congregations in our Northeastern Minnesota Synod.

The Fourth Sunday of the Easter Season is traditionally known as ‘Good Shepherd Sunday.’ The Gospel reading is always from the tenth chapter of St John and the Psalmody is always Psalm 23. Bishop Aitken has decided to publish a sermon for all the congregations in our synod on this Good Shepherd Sunday. It is no accident the symbol used for the office of Bishop is the shepherd’s staff [more formally, the crosier]. What follows are the texts for today from St John’s Gospel and Psalm 23; and Bishop Aitken’s sermon.

In Christ ✝,

Pastor Steve

**Gospel: John 10.1-10, 22-30**

[Jesus said to his disciples,] <sup>1</sup>“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. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

<sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. <sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly . . .

<sup>22</sup>At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, <sup>23</sup>and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. <sup>24</sup>So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” <sup>25</sup>Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; <sup>26</sup>but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. <sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup>What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. <sup>30</sup>The Father and I are one.”

This is the gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

**Psalmody: Psalm 23**

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I 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 my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Amen.

## **Bishop Thomas Aitken's Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday**

**Dear beloved in our Synod,**

**Grace and peace to you, through Christ our brother, our Good Shepherd, and Lord.**

Psalm 23, appointed as one of the lessons today, is the best-known passage of Scripture in the whole world, and one of the most powerful ones. Let's look and listen to how this psalm, linked together today with Jesus in our gospel lesson brings new life to us in our "Valley of the Shadow of death."

The person who wrote Psalm 23 was on a journey. Like yours and mine, it was a journey of life and of faith. Something happened to this person, something tragic. You live long enough and you'll experience not only the beauty but also the pain of life. It will happen. And you will have questions that Psalm 23 addresses honestly. You might be worried today about a loved one who could easily get the coronavirus. Or maybe you have already lost a friend or relative to it. You may be living with another "dark valley" right now with that relative whose life has hit bottom with deep anxiety, chemical dependency, or loss of income to take care of your family.

The bad thing that happens to this Biblical writer shows up in the very middle of the psalm. In Verse 4, "Even though I walk through the **darkest valley** (or, in earlier translations, "**the valley of the shadow of death**") are the words that describe the author's tragedy. Before verse four, things went well: There were quiet waters, lush green pastures and life was good, then the tragedy happens. We don't know what it was; it could have been that the Psalmist experienced the death of a family member, or that death was approaching soon. Or it could have been an illness that would force the Psalmist or a loved one out of the community in those days, or a huge rejection or betrayal. But something tragic happened. The author does not mince words or cover this tragedy with sugary piety. Notice how Psalm 23 does not declare that God keeps pious people safe from all harm or that your life will be danger-free if you pray, read scripture and do good things. It doesn't say that those who love God will receive a protection bubble from illness or the power of wind, water or gravity. I once had an Intern, back in the 90's who wrote a paper for Seminary entitled, "Into every Life a little rain must Fall." And of course this is true. We used that paper as a resource for faith and bible study and the problem of evil and natural tragedies. That can be helpful, well and good for when there are no pandemics, when your own life isn't in the balance. What we are getting in Psalm 23 is more: it is the real-life journey of faith that ends in strength and new life in the midst of tragedy.

Hear the Good News in this famous Psalm. In the last half of Psalm 23 we get in on how the writer has experienced God in some powerful way, right in the valley of the shadow of death. God doesn't abandon us but leads us through the dangers. Psalm 23 invites us to experience living with trust in the goodness of God. Back in seminary I was introduced to the devotional writings of first century rabbis. I came across one who

wrote a morning prayer I have never forgotten. He wrote, “O Holy One, if this were the only day You would have granted me to live, for this day alone, I give you eternal thanks.”

Now Hear the Psalm again: “Even though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me **in the presence of** my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” (Verses 4-6)

Many of you know that my good friend and mentor of 35 years, Pastor Earl Carlson died on Easter Sunday just a few weeks ago. He was 101 years old and we talked right up to his last days. What the Psalmist says about God’s goodness, even in the midst of tragedy is exactly what Earl taught me over and over. He was born with polio – and it remained in his body all his life until in his old age he was bent in half from the waist. I remember many people saying to him, “Why you, Earl? You are so kind, so helpful, you bring us such joy. Why do you have to suffer, why did God let this happen to you?” And you know what he would say? . . . “Why not me”? Life is good, Life is beautiful. This kind of thing happens to many people, why should I be different? And just remember, like you my life is joined to Jesus’ life forever.”

Jesus knew, didn’t he, what it meant to live in God’s world, with goodness, risks, and tragedy. He entered it and through his life, death and resurrection showed God’s power in the midst of all that life can bring us. He was not ashamed to call us – as you know – sisters and brothers to him. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our own faith, standing with us in the midst of our weakness and fear to bring new life into us when we need it most.

God is not a magic rabbit’s foot, or lucky charm. God is the love that brings us hope, the strength to live in adversity, the courage to stand against evil, the joy to live life abundantly as Jesus says in our Gospel lesson today: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (verse 10) And God is the power to endure suffering as the Psalmist proclaims and the power to serve our neighbor as Martin Luther always reminded his flock. We may wish God had made a different kind of world. But this is the world God made and God is still working in, redeeming all of creation, all of humankind, even our last “enemies” and tragedies. Christ says to you today: ‘I am your gate, I am your shepherd, I am your bread, your sustenance, your resurrection and life. ‘And he will bring us home one day. You can count on it, today, tomorrow, next week, the rest of your lives and into Eternity.

Trust the Story. Trust Jesus. Trust the gospel.

To the glory of God, and the good of your neighbor. Amen.