

Whenever there is transition or change in our lives, we tend to experience an element of uncertainty and even fear. I know that as I leave you, I feel the uncertainty of a future that is not yet known. I have been experiencing this uncertainty for you as I deeply want you to be protected and cared for. So, as I am honest and acknowledge that sense of uncertainty and fear, it is comforting to me that our readings today focus on God as our shepherd, the Good Shepherd. It is reassuring because I know I can place my trust in the Good Shepherd, regardless of what happens and what the future brings.

We just heard the words of Psalm 23, a psalm that we sang between the first and second reading. It is a psalm we will also sing as the Hymn of the Day. This is probably one of the best known, best loved poems in scripture. It is known by people around the world. In fact, I am sure many of you know Psalm 23 by heart. This psalm tells each one of you that God is like a shepherd, caring for you, protecting you and guiding you. God is the shepherd who walks with you through all of life and provides you with what you need, even in dark valleys when we experience the shadow of death, even in trying times, even in uncertain times.

In today's gospel reading from John, we hear more about the one we call the **Good** Shepherd. For the community to which John was writing, living with fear and uncertainty was a familiar aspect of daily existence. John's community lived with the reality of persecution and the threat of extinction. Their first-century Mediterranean world was a scary place. Persecutions were heating up, and the followers of Jesus were, in the eyes of Rome, just more lambs for the lions. The Jesus movement was still new, struggling to define itself against the threat of Rome as well as the threat of competing philosophies and counter claims to truth.

So, within that social context, these early Christians told stories. Often meeting under the cover of darkness, hidden from the authorities, huddled in some secret spot, while listening for the sound of Roman boots, they told stories to counter their fear. They told stories that helped to remind them of their identity, to remind them to whom they belonged, and remind them where they could place their trust. When they heard the story of the shepherd and the sheep, it helped them remember **who** they were and **whose** they were. It reminded them of their identity as Christians.

While the metaphor of sheep and shepherd is rather foreign to us, this metaphor made enormous sense to John's community. In ancient Palestine, multiple shepherds brought their sheep into a common sheepfold

for the night. In the morning, in order to take their sheep out to the fields for grazing, each shepherd had to separate his sheep from the common flock. Each sheep had a name, and each shepherd had a unique manner or way of calling his or her sheep, so each sheep would respond **only** to its own shepherd. Even if another shepherd called the sheep by its own name, it would not respond. It was the **knowing** that counted.

Yes, John's community knew about **good** shepherds. And they also knew about **bad** shepherds, the thieves of the story who taxed the poor into poverty, the ones who starved the people and fed only themselves, the ones who traded the shalom of their tradition for the Pax Romana of empire. No doubt they **longed** for a **good** shepherd. In John's telling of the Jesus story, they hear that *Jesus* is the *Good Shepherd*, the way of comfort and sustenance, abundance and strength, even in the face of death and grief.

I can also imagine that, in their social context, there were times when the people's fear got the best of them, and they became more concerned about the identity of the stranger than their own identity. But the story of the shepherd helped them to remember a better way. They knew about the **way** of the Good Shepherd, and that was the way of **love**, not fear. They became the **people** of the Good Shepherd. In fact, this image was so

meaningful to them they began to scratch on catacomb walls the image of the Good Shepherd with a lamb slung over his shoulders. They painted this image on baptismal fonts to mark the beginning of life and they carved the Good Shepherd into tombs, to mark the end of life. They **belonged** to the Good Shepherd, from the beginning of their lives to the end of their lives. The term *Good Shepherd* was much more than words, much more than an idea. This understanding of Jesus as their Good Shepherd deeply shaped their very identity and **way** of life. They understood they were to **live** the Good Shepherd way. The early Christians in John's community knew they **belonged**. And it did not stop there. The way of the Good Shepherd was the way of wide-reaching **embrace**. Just as each one of them had found a safe place belonging on the inside of their faith community, so were they to include those at the far edge, those in the **margins**, the least of these and the most vulnerable. Just as they had been given hope in dark and violent times, so were they to encourage one another. Just as they were held close in the comfort of the loving shepherd, so were they to reach out, hold others close, comfort others and care for others. And, those early followers of Jesus became **known** for their **generosity**, for the way they **cared** for the very least and the lost, the way they **loved** others, and the way they truly cared for the **common good**. They became known for their **love** as

they became the **Beloved Community**. In that context, while still facing uncertainty, they experienced the **abundant life** of which Jesus speaks, the abundant life that is **only** found in the community of Jesus' followers.

My dear, treasured people of Faith Lutheran Church, that is how **you** are known. **You** are known as people who deeply care for the **common good** of **all** people and not just your own interests. Life in the community of Faith Lutheran truly is about the **common good** and not just each one of you as an individual. You are a **beloved** community, caring for each other and for the most vulnerable around us, and I **know** you will continue to do this after I leave. You will continue to do this because you know **who** you are and **whose** you are. You **belong** to the Good Shepherd who is all about **love**. The opposite of fear, after all, is **love**. And, that kind of love is **not** some sweet sentimental kind of love. No. It is the heavy lifting love of the Good Shepherd. As I have said before, loving is hard work and loving our neighbors can be **very** hard work. But, when we remember our **identity** and to **whom** we belong, we are then able to truly **live** love.

So, as I leave you, I entrust you to the care of the Good Shepherd who will **never** leave you. As I leave you, I entrust you to the Good Shepherd, the one who calls you by name and has made you his very own, even as you walk through the darkest valleys of life, even as we presently

grieve together. I entrust you to the care of the Good Shepherd as you walk into a future where God is already present and calling you into new forms of ministry and new ventures yet unknown. I entrust you to the guidance and care of the Good Shepherd who holds all of us in God's arms of love for all eternity.