

This past Thursday was Earth Day, and for people worldwide who are part of the environmental movement, it was and continues to be not only a time for reflection on the goodness of creation, but also the many ways in which we have abused the good creation we have been given. And, for the church, it's the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Easter is the season throughout which the church is continually reminded of the resurrection of Jesus. All our Bible readings throughout this season focus on new life – the Easter life – that God promises for the whole cosmos.

Again, on this past Earth Day, environmentalists have reminded us that plastic waste continues to kill ocean life, our planet's ice is melting even faster than we thought, climate change is bringing more and greater disasters each year for which we inevitably find humanity unprepared, and species from snails to bats to lizards have been declared extinct, never to be seen on Earth again.

As we think about these things, just listen to a version of Psalm 23, written by jazz vocalist Bobby McFerrin and dedicated to his mother:

The Lord is my shepherd
I have all I need
She makes me lie down in green meadows
Beside the still waters she will lead
She restores my soul
She rights my wrongs

She leads me in a path of good things
And fills my heart with songs
Even though I walk through a dark and dreary land
There is nothing that can shake me
She has said she won't forsake me,
I'm in her hand
She sets a table before me
In the presence of my foes
She anoints my head with oil
And my cup overflows
Surely, surely goodness and kindness will follow me
All the days of my life
And I will live in her house forever
Forever and ever.

We cannot help but hear in this Psalm promises of green earth and clean water, the promise of abundant food and wine and oil, and the promise that this planet is made for goodness, and for mercy, and for home, **our** home and the home of all living things.

The psalmist writes famously "The Lord is my shepherd." And centuries later, the writer of the gospel of John attributes the same imagery to Jesus when we hear Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd." These images of shepherd and sheep show up a lot in the Bible, and the imagery can be complicated. It's complicated in part because most of us don't have a ton of direct experience with the practice of sheep-keeping. But more than that, shepherding can get sentimentalized into this sort of mushy idea of a Jesus who's just super wise and gentle, with soft hair flowing in the breeze and a gentle beam of sunlight on his dark skin.

Yet, we know that Jesus is many things. The gospels tell us that Jesus is not only gentle but also fierce, Jesus is bold, and at times offensive. Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd,” but we also call Jesus the “Lamb.” The imagery is messy and complex.

Truthfully, we’re not the first ones to idealize shepherding – by the time Jesus lived on earth, shepherding was actually no longer the central economic practice. However, there was this collective memory of a time when nomadic ancestors roamed the countryside and kept sheep as a source of life. The ancestral connection to sheep and shepherding carried over so that when the people wanted to talk about leadership, someone who was responsible for the well-being of a group, it made sense to talk about shepherds. Throughout the ancient near east, kings and deities are compared to shepherds, and the royal scepter is said to have evolved from the shepherd’s crook.

Jesus reminds us there are many different kinds of shepherds. It wouldn’t have been hard for the hearers of John’s gospel to imagine what Jesus meant in today’s reading when he talked about the hired hand. From what Jesus say about the hired hand, we can picture this person as a quasi-leader who sort of acts **like** he or she cares for the flock, but then as soon as things get serious, it becomes clear that leader was actually only in

it for the money! This is the kind of leader who doesn't have any sense of care or common belonging with the flock but **leaves** the flock to be hurt by the forces of evil and death. That kind of leadership isn't hard to imagine because we've experienced it. Sometimes, it is harder to imagine what it would look like for world leaders, or people in positions of authority, to be good, wholesome, ethical people who truly care about and for **all people**.

So, the gospel of John provides us this image of the model shepherd:

- Someone who would risk personal harm for the sake of the group's well-being.
- Someone who belongs to the flock, and the flock belong to him or her.
- Someone who loves and takes care of the sheep.
- Someone who notices the **other** sheep also, and is always gathering the "others" in.

Friends, **good** shepherds are **good** not because they have some special skills that the hired hand doesn't, but because of **relationship**. The reason good shepherds don't sell out is because they are connected by this deep mutual knowledge, creature to creature, that each one's life only makes sense when we're all safe.

As we continue to think about this earth, care of the earth, and Jesus saying that **he** is the Good Shepherd, make no mistake; God is not only the good shepherd of **human** earth-creatures. God is **also** shepherd of literal sheep and **all** living creatures, including the earth itself! God is shepherd of

the mountain goats, and of the snails, bats, and lizards, and God is shepherd of the green pastures, and of the still waters and all their insects, and of the ice caps and the atmosphere. That is the way that God relates to each created thing in the cosmos, with deep knowledge of our wild creatureliness, with deep care for our well-being, and **no** creature is left out of that care.

Throughout the Easter season, we continue to learn more each day about what it means to trust in God's abundant new life. Proclaiming **that** abundant Easter new life is not easy. It's not simply idealism. It **doesn't** mean pretending that the forces of the cross and grave aren't as real and harsh as we know they still are. Instead, it is a fierce clinging to God's promise. Proclaiming Easter means insisting week after week that God's future will not be just a far-off dream, God's love will not be imprisoned to the realm of word or speech, but God's future and God's love will be made real **in truth and action.**

In an era of scarred landscapes and lead-poisoned water, Easter is green pastures and still waters that feed the body and soul. In the midst of malignant individualism and the far too often violent enforcement of the status quo, Easter is pointing to restoration, mercy, and the way of good things. And, when it becomes difficult to imagine that we might ever

emerge alive from the depths of shadow and despair, **God shows us a future** – not without valleys or wolves – but a future in which we are **not** alone and **never** abandoned by the one who is good.

PASTOR ELLEN: God teaches us that we are beloved, cherished, and invited to God's cosmic party table overflowing with food and drink for **all**. When we come to that table, that cosmic table, we begin to notice that we're not alone anymore, but part of a much bigger flock that stretches out beyond borders and across species to the whole of creation. God cares for **all** of creation! And, that should invite us to work diligently for the **care** of creation and **restoration** of creation in **all** that we do. The Easter message tells us that no longer is abundant life obscured. Now we can perceive clearly the one who is leading us always towards our home, which is abundant, restored life. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!