

April 22, 2018 • Fourth Sunday of Easter • Earth Day

“Love's the Shepherd of All” Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will 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 mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Today is Earth Day. The first Earth Day in 1970 achieved what might now seem impossible, bi-partisan support from Republicans and Democrats as well as widespread support across the country. By the end of that year, the first Earth Day had led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts.

Today is also the fourth Sunday in Easter, this season in which the church is called to live into the meaning and power of the resurrection promise. How does that resurrection promise speak to our recent Lenten theme of Love God/Love Creation? What is it about the very nature of our Risen Lord that calls us to love God's whole creation just as he does? How do we model our lives after his and live in the power of his love?

Interestingly enough, the fourth Sunday of Easter is also traditionally called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” That’s a lot of themes going on here, but I think they all tie together. Let’s explore that for a few moments this morning.

Across the centuries, the church has lifted up a variety of names and metaphors for Christ—Messiah, Savior, Lord, King of Kings. These are all images of power and victory and triumph, appropriate, yes, for this Easter season in which God in Christ has conquered death and set him above all powers and principalities of this world.

So it's interesting that, of all those names, all those ways of thinking about and experiencing Christ, the church, for as long as anyone can remember, has set aside this Fourth Sunday of Easter in the church year and called it “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The Gospel comes from the Gospel of John where Jesus speaks of himself as the “good shepherd. And it is on this day that we hear the words of the familiar 23rd Psalm. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul...and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Images of shepherds and sheep, as metaphors for God and God's people, are woven throughout the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments. This makes perfect sense when we think about the role sheep played in life and economy of the holy lands for generations and generations, providing food and wool for clothing. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Moses, and King David, the psalmist, were all shepherds.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke to God's people during the time of their exile in Babylon. To comfort them and restore their hope and give them courage, he called them to envision life in what would be their new promised homeland. He described it as the restoration of God's original paradise, as abundant pasture lands tended by a shepherd. This “good shepherd” would seek out missing sheep and rescue them from danger. He would feed them on the mountains and lead them to good water and grazing land. He would care for the sick and the injured and give strength to the weak. He would feed the people with justice and make a covenant of peace. He would help the God's people flourish, hearing God saying: “I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase....”

Centuries later, harkening back to these ancient prophecies, Jesus would call himself “the Good Shepherd” and this very vision from Ezekiel would describe both his leadership while revealing God's promise to restore the whole of creation through him.

As I thought about Jesus as our Good Shepherd, I remembered the children's song that we hear at Christmastime about his birth, the donkey, cow, dove, and sheep gathered 'round.

“Jesus, our brother, kind and good,
Was humbly born in a stable rude;
And the friendly beasts around him stood,
Jesus, our brother, kind and good.”

“I,” said the sheep with the curly horn,
“I gave him my wool for a blanket warm.
He wore my coat on Christmas morn.”
“I,” said the sheep with the curly horn.”

Jesus, born in a stable, cradled in a manger, the sounds of the animals adding their chorus to the lullaby his mother, Mary, sang to him. He was born as much for them as for us.

In fact, you see, Jesus was born and lived and raised up not just for us alone but for the whole of creation. As our understanding of the universe has expanded, our explorations into space, the work of zoologists and botanists, and climatologists has revealed...we humans are one of 8.7 million species living on earth and in the oceans, and earth just one small planet in an immense universe. And God, through our risen Lord, created and loves it all. It is mind-boggling and awesome to consider. And we, who would lead and serve in the manner of Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and called to love and serve it all, to nurture and protect—the coastlands, the coral reefs, islands that will be submerged in the rising ocean waters unless current conditions are reversed—the Solomon and Marshall Islands, Tonga, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Cook Islands in the Pacific Ocean, Antigua and Nevis in the Caribbean Sea, the Maldives in the Indian Ocean...

Christ rose to save them all.

On this Earth Day 2018 our amazing 11-person team is beginning their work in Liberty, Texas, working alongside our brothers and sisters there in the Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, to restore homes that were flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. Scientists predict now that such devastating storms will become more and more frequent as the earth's surface temperature warms and the seas rise.

We followers of Jesus the Good Shepherd are called to relief work yes, and more. We are called to be good shepherds of the whole of creation. The love of a shepherd is tender and fierce, a love that is selfless, compassionate, generous to a fault. The love of a shepherd is always doing for the other. The love of the shepherd is love always seeking nurture and living water for the flock. The love of the shepherd counts the one as important as the ninety-nine.

How are we to be shepherds of the whole creation? Pope Francis has challenged us to think deeply about “how we are shaping the future of our planet.” In his papal encyclical on the care of creation, he reminds us that Jesus “has a loving, tangible” relationship with the entire creation. He wrote: “the very flower of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.”

And so, as the contemporary theologian Elizabeth Johnson has noted, the answer to the biblical question “who is my neighbor” must go far beyond our fellow human beings—and that’s hard enough! Your neighbor, she writes is also that whale and that bumblebee and that ocean and that supernova. My neighbor is that young coyote I saw loping along in my neighborhood last week. That jacaranda tree readying to burst forth in lavender glory. All as much my neighbors as the family and their dog who live next door.

Our own United Methodist Book of Discipline, the book that contains the rules, theology and framework for our life together as the United Methodist Church, calls United Methodists to be caretakers of God's Creation. “All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect...let us recognize the responsibility of the church and its members to place a high priority on changes...[that] support a higher quality of life for all of God's creation.”

So, going forward, let's make every day an Earth Day and live each day with a sense of urgent faithfulness.

For Christ arose, as we'll sing in our closing hymn today, a hymn chosen for us by the ringers themselves who love to play it. The Good Shepherd arose. His love reigns forever and ever. It lives in our hearts. Love lives in our every word and deed. Love lives throughout the whole creation, giving glory to God forever.

Christ is risen. HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Amen.

Notes:

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

Pope Francis. *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*. Encyclical Letter 2015.

Brandon Ambrosino. “How might Easter be reinterpreted in light of climate change?” *Religion News Service*, March 29, 2018.

The 2016 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, para. 160.

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