

We know from accounts in the gospels many asked the question, “Who is this Jesus?” Many listened to Peter and the other apostles’ teaching as they shared all they knew about Jesus in the days following the resurrection. And we know from the Acts of the Apostles and Peter’s letters, the answer to this question changed the way they lived their lives. “Who is this Jesus?” is just as relevant a question today.

“The Lord is my shepherd” says the psalmist. The Lord is “shepherd and guardian of your souls,” writes St. Peter. In one of St. John’s most endearing and enduring images for Jesus, we hear Jesus is the shepherd, whose sheep know his voice and follow, as well as the gate for the sheep, the way to enter into the safety and security of the fold; the way to enter into this new and abundant life of grace.

One of my favorite hymns sung this Good Shepherd Sunday is, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is,” no doubt because the gate for the sheep as I understand it is “the way of love.”

Psalm 23 is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving. It is not, though, a psalm reflective of a life going very well. Rather it is praise for God’s goodness in deliverance from any one of life’s many difficult or threatening situations. Perhaps that is why we think of the twenty-third psalm so often in the context of death. It is, by far, the most often requested psalm at a funeral liturgy.

But, Psalm 23 has much to say to us in the midst of life as well. In the Good News translation, “The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.” Typically, a good shepherd provides all necessities for the sheep in his or her care: food, water, safety; and God is no different. So, there are “green pastures and still waters.”

But even more than basic necessities, the good shepherd “revives my soul, and guides me along right pathways for his name’s sake.”

We aren’t just one of the flock, sheep, dirty, smelly, and dumb, we are beloved children of God, cared for mercifully out of an abundance of unmerited and unconditional love – the very love that is the balm for every hurting or anxious soul.

The Good Shepherd not only sustains us, the Good Shepherd heals and restores us. And therefore, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Wonderful, comforting words, especially in a time like this when we know our reliance on God all too well.

“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me.” God provides all we need, and provides abundantly. In Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, he paraphrases this verse as, “You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies; you revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing,” putting God’s generosity and benevolence on full display. No enemy can defeat us in God’s economy of blessing and abundance.

God's economy is a theological phrase meant to explain how things work in God's realm. There is justice; there is peace; there is goodness and wholeness; because there is God's immeasurable love.

"Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Given all that the twenty-third psalm promises, why would we choose to dwell anywhere else? Why would we turn our backs on this Good Shepherd in favor of following another? From ancient biblical times the Good Shepherd has been the personification of the hope, promise, safety, and love of life lived with God at the center.

The world offers many distractions, other "shepherds" to follow, to fill our hunger and meet our supposed needs; the needs the world defines for us. And we are often tempted by these other "shepherds;" this is where sin comes into our lives. Until we remember, again with a paraphrase by Peterson, in the final verse of Psalm 23, "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life." What a wonderful notion. We are pursued by God, relentlessly and lovingly, throughout our lives and we can count on these continued blessings of thriving, abundance of life, safety and security, because the Shepherd is faithful and true.

So, once again, "Who is this Jesus?" We Christians acknowledge Jesus as our Good Shepherd. It is Jesus we follow because it is Jesus who shows us the way to know God the father. (There will be much more about this next Sunday.) Jesus is the Good Shepherd who loves us, heals us, stands with us in joy and in sorrow, who died for us so we could be raised with him in newness of life, whole, forgiven, and loved unconditionally. Jesus is the one who walks with us during this uncertain and scary time. Jesus shows us, his beloved flock, dirty, smelly, lost, and afraid, God's mercy and love.

We wonder about life in the future. What will be important? What will be left? Who will we be and what will we do? There is no doubt life as we know it will change. We might even be overwhelmed by our uncertainty and fear. Julian of Norwich, in the time of the Black Plague, still managed to write these reassuring words, "All will be well." She could write them, and believe them, because of her deep and abiding trust in Jesus, Lord and Savior, to shepherd her through the darkest of times; to provide for her abundantly out of great mercy and love.

Throughout our life of faith, we confront the question, "Who is this Jesus?" again and again. We can't follow without knowing the answer. For today, on this Good Shepherd Sunday, we find our answer in John's gospel, Peter's letter, and the 23rd Psalm. Thanks be to God.