

April 21, 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Acts 4:5-12

Psalms 23

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

For those of us who have been going to church since God was a small child, you know this fourth Sunday of Easter as Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel lesson for this day is always from the tenth chapter of John, where Jesus makes one of his seven “I Am” statements: *I am the good shepherd*.

The image of the Good Shepherd is familiar and well-loved. What do you see in your mind’s eye when you hear *I am the good shepherd*? Maybe there was a picture of a gentle-faced Jesus in your childhood bedroom, with an adorable lamb perched on his shoulders. I remember making flocks of sheep out of toothpicks, cotton balls, and Elmer’s glue in Sunday School. From greeting cards to stained glass, we’ve learned to know and love the Good Shepherd as one who is meek and mild.

But let’s remember where we are. The tenth chapter of John’s gospel, the so-called “Good Shepherd Discourse” comes immediately after the story of Jesus healing the man born blind on the Sabbath that we find in chapter 9. In the face of the spiritual blindness of the religious authorities who condemn Jesus for this healing, Jesus offers himself as a counter example: *I am the good shepherd*.

Shepherds were deeply ingrained in the life and religious imagination of the Israelites. Rachel was a shepherd. Zipporah and her sisters were shepherds. Moses tended sheep before God called him to lead the Israelites out of slavery. King David started out as a shepherd.

The Jewish people of Jesus’s day knew God as the ultimate Shepherd. Psalm 80 begins, *Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!* And the theme of human leaders as either good or bad shepherds, runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.¹

In the section just before what we read today (vs 1-10), Jesus contrasted the good shepherd with thieves and bandits. Today, he makes the distinction between the good

¹ See especially Ezekiel 34.

shepherd and the hired hand, which feels particularly appropriate to us, for at least two reasons.

First, good shepherds appear to be few and far between, and are vastly outnumbered by hired hands. Maybe this has always been so, but it seems especially true nowadays. Second, it feels like any promises, even Jesus' promises, such as *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly* (Jn 10:10), are met with skepticism, if not derision, by people (like us), who are just plain worn out by anxiety about injustice, division, and violence.

What is the difference between a good shepherd and a hired hand? The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Period. Contrast that with the *hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them*. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

Hired hands, for the most part, aren't out to destroy the sheep – like the thieves of the previous section – but they just aren't committed enough to risk their lives for the flock. They seem to be in it for the cash rather than out of genuine care. They have an important job to do, but they do it for themselves, with little regard for those entrusted to their care.

I think there are many hired hands in our world today – both people and institutions with legitimate and important roles, but who seem to have more regard for themselves than for those they are called to serve. I want to suggest three.

A first hired hand is the marketing-saturated world whose intent is to create within us a sense of lack that, in turn, drives consumption. There is a gripping episode of the PBS documentary series, *Frontline*, entitled "The Persuaders." It is about the changing nature of marketing itself – from making promises about brand quality, to making promises about quality of life. While the products themselves may be useful, even necessary – a reliable laptop or a good pair of walking shoes – retail therapy cannot provide the abundant life we seek.

A second hired hand is social media. I want to say first that, as a means of staying connected with others, social media is both legitimate and, as the pandemic taught us, incredibly important.

But, at the end of the day, the ultimate purpose of social media corporations is neither care nor kindness, but profits. Profits are tied to ad views and screen time, and algorithms beckon us to spend more and more time online. And I tell you this as one who loves his YouTube shorts, aka Tick Tock.

The drive to accumulate likes and followers creates a relentless need for external affirmation. And what happens when we don't get it? Or get the opposite – trolling and bullying. Anxious life? Yes. Abundant life? Well...

A third hired hand is the polarized and hyper-partisan politics of division that we see every day. I want to be very clear that I think that democratic, republican government is one of God's gifts to us, because politics – derived from the Greek term *polis*, "people" – can be an unbelievably important process through which God cares for all of God's people ... abundantly.

But, today, instead of learning to identify who or what we are, we are pressured to define ourselves in terms of who/what we're against, not even who/what we're for. So, we are stuck with only an identity of opposition, which turns into distrust and hatred, and leads to violence. Angry life, for sure. Abundant life, hardly.

What all three of these categories of hired hands have in common is their emphasis on the self above others, and their false promises that "image is everything," "you do not have enough," "you are not enough," "you should be afraid." We are surrounded on every side by hired hands calling us to lay down our lives for them, but they are ready to abandon us in a heartbeat.

By contrast, Jesus offers himself as the good shepherd, with the promise of abundant life. And the proof of his faithfulness is simply this: he is willing to lay down his life on behalf of the sheep. We hear this echoed in the second reading: *we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us* (1 Jn 3:16). This sacrificial love is his purpose, the source of his power, and an enduring example for us.

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So, gentle friends, what do you do with all of that? The good news is that you have already been promised Jesus' presence and protection. But, as Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) reminded us, there is no such thing as an individual Christian. In the English language, there is no separate singular form of the word *sheep*.

With that in mind, can you imagine yourself, propelled by the promise of the Good Shepherd, offering the possibility of a different life to those around you? To invite them into new life within the community of the Good Shepherd.

A life that is richer and more substantial than cute cotton-ball sheep and greeting cards. A life that turns down the volume on the hired hands of the world, and listens more closely for the voice of the good shepherd calling each one by name, and tirelessly seeking out the wanderers to bring them home.

This is the invitation. This is the work. And for this work, you are enough, and you have enough. You have more than enough for yourself and plenty to share besides.

You are beloved of God. You are a child of God. Fear not, little flock, for the Good Shepherd who laid down his life and took it back up again is with you and for you... forever.

Let me close with those familiar words from the Shepherd King (say them with me) ... *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.*

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia! Amen.