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## *The Lord is My Shepherd I Shall Also*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**Easter 4 – Year B**

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our redeemer. Amen.* (Paraphrase, Psalm 19:14)

I greet you this morning in the name of God our ‘Good Shepherd!’ That’s because this Fourth [Sabbath] of Easter is always, every year, also known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” You might have guessed that from the Gospel reading we’ve just heard already. [In the Episcopal Church we also have the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm appointed for today. Taken together the readings remind me of that cartoon that shows two arrows pointing in opposite directions. I can’t find the name of the cartoonist but really want to applaud him or her for the very clever caption underneath the image of those two opposing arrows.

The caption says quite simply, “You will make the right decision.” That’s right! Whichever way you go will be the right decision according to this cartoon. It’s completely counter-intuitive of course—that is, completely contrary to what everyone normally expects to be true: to think that by going in either one or the other direction you will still make the right decision. But that is the wisdom that is commended to us in some cases; not in all cases of course, but in particular cases like today’s observance of this ‘Good Shepherd Sunday.’

And here’s my sermon title that I hope will be your caption for keeping God as our Good Shepherd with you in the days ahead: “The Lord is My Shepherd I Shall Also.” That’s it: as simple as that. “The Lord is My Shepherd I Shall Also.” Of course it might be an easier title to understand if we add three little dots after that last word: *also—dot, dot, dot*. Then today’s sermon title might read, “The Lord is My Shepherd”—comma—“I Shall Also . . .”—dot, dot, dot—you fill in the blank line. But I prefer the stark, abrupt, and more attention-getting title without the dots. Just simply contemplate with me—come on, people, work with me!—as you contemplate with me the simple prayer-like phrase without any dots or commas: “The Lord is my shepherd I shall also.”

I’m taking some time and care to lay this out because that phrase connects the dots between our 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the Gospel appointed for today. Take the psalm first. It begins, of course as we heard, with that classic verse in the King James Version (Psalm 23.1):

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

If we were raised in a church-going family we are likely to have the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in our minds as firmly as we have the Lord’s Prayer; that most familiar Christian prayer that is sometimes called the “Our Father” by our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. But the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm from the Hebrew Bible is a close companion to the Lord’s Prayer as the second most familiar Christian prayer. One observer calls it “not only the best-known psalm, but perhaps the best-known chapter of the whole Bible.” (Nancy Hopkins-Greene; Sunday, April 26, 2015; *Forward Day by Day*; [www.forwardmovement.org](http://www.forwardmovement.org).)

It’s very meaningful, therefore, that in today’s gospel Jesus calls himself, “the good shepherd.” Thereby he makes *himself* most familiar to us—familiar in the sense of close and intimate. Indeed, perhaps this is the most *intimate* representation of God for all human beings when Jesus says:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ...

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ...

And I lay down *my* life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” (John 10:11, 14-18)

I hope we all hear the Easter theme of God’s resurrection power in that last verse: “I lay down my life in order to take it up again ... I have received this command from my Father.” But here I am charged as your preacher for today to highlight for us today the purpose of Jesus’ resurrection power ‘to lay down his life in order take it up again.’ It’s the purpose of ‘shepherding’ us—all of us—but shepherding all of us into becoming ourselves shepherds of each other’s souls!

And this brings us back to my sermon title for today, and to that image of the double-direction arrows that I mentioned at the start. The title again is, “The Lord is My Shepherd *I* Shall Also,” and the caption of the double-direction arrows is, “You will make the right decision.”

You will make the right decision, church friends, if you go in either direction here today: in the direction either of receiving and following Jesus as *your* shepherd, or the other direction of you also shepherding others in the power of a risen life that ‘lays down its life in order to take it up again.’ In fact these two different directions converge like a circle, don’t they? So they also meet after traversing different paths.

Sometimes we need simply and solely to be intimately embraced my God as our Good Shepherd, don’t we? That’s why I most often recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm over someone in their sick bed or their death bed. So often we can reclaim that intimate shepherding of our souls as we hear in the old, familiar language of the King James Version:

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.

Psalm 23, King James Version; “The Burial of the Dead: Rite One,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (Church Hymnal Society, 1979), pp. 476-477.

But at other times, rather, as that classic Prayer of St. Frances declares so boldly, ‘we seek not so much’—

to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we  
are born to eternal life.

“A Prayer attributed to St. Francis.” *The Book of Common Prayer* (Church Hymnal Society, 1979), pp. 833.

Now that prayer leads us to our final texts appointed for today; our epistle text and a collect or opening prayer. For it is in these verses from 1 John that we are enjoined also to be shepherds of each other’s souls. Indeed, this epistle of John uses the very same expression that we hear in our Gospel of John today where Jesus says, “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10.15). “We know love by this,” the 1 John reading begins:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.  
How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him . . . because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us (John 3:16-20, 22-23)

It’s remarkable here that this reading both begins *and* ends like our Gospel reading. Each of these two readings begins with laying down one’s life for others and ends with the command to do so. Jesus in the Gospel declares that he is commanded by his Father to do so, and the epistle declares that Jesus’s followers are likewise commanded to do so. But how can laying down one’s life for others be so boldly commanded in each case? In the case of Jesus such a commandment leads to his tragic death, of course—and to his ultimate resurrection also, by God! But what justifies such boldness in our own case? How and why would any one of us also adopt a life-posture of ‘laying down our lives in order—in the precise words of the gospel—to take them up again?

Here I can best conclude with the following reflection on the nature of love by one of my favorite European philosophers—the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of loving others based on finding some commonalities that we share with them, Kierkegaard declares instead:

*Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secured against every change, eternally made free in blessed independence, eternally and happily secured against despair.*

However joyous, however happy, however indescribably confident instinctive and inclinational love, spontaneous love, can be in itself, it still feels precisely in its most beautiful moment the need to establish itself, if possible, more securely. Therefore [friends and couples] pledge; they pledge fidelity or friendship to one another. And when we talk most solemnly we do not say of the two: "they love another"; we say "They pledged fidelity" or "They pledge friendship to one another." By what, then, do they swear this love? ... God in heaven is the only one who is truly in a position to swear by himself ...

Consequently, *only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secure*. This security of the eternal casts out all anxiety and makes the love perfect, perfectly secure. For in ... [instinctive, inclinational, spontaneous] love ... however confident it may be, there is still an anxiety, anxiety over the possibility of change. ... Spontaneous love can be changed within itself; it can be changed to its opposite, to *hate* ... Spontaneous love can be changed within itself; by spontaneous combustion it can become *jealousy*; from the greatest happiness it can become the greatest torment ... In this way the [commandment] "You shall" makes love free in blessed independence; such a love stands and does not fall with variations in the object of love; it stands and falls with eternity's law, but therefore it never falls. (Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Deliberations in the Form of Discourses*; Harper Torchbook, 1962/64; pp. 44-49, 53; <http://sorenkierkegaard.org/works-of-love.html> )

So much then for our philosophical ‘great Dane!’ But here, in addition to his examples of marriage or friendship let me offer an alternative illustration. It’s a simple, everyday example that we all experience at least once a month if not a couple of times a week. It’s the experience referred to in our epistle: seeing someone who needs food or clothing, or money for food or clothing. Now if you’re like me then you know what I mean when I say that I discover again and again that I often I

lack affinity or inclination or spontaneous response in such a case to 'love my neighbor.' Instead, and again if you're like me, then you know that most often we're in the position of having simply to obey the commandment, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount:

Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:42; cf. Luke 6:30)

And heaven forbid that we should find ourselves among who in the judgement hour hear this heart-rending verdict:

Depart from me ... for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:41-45).

Just here I am reminded of that striking verse from the George Herbert poem, "The Altar." And I hear the verse as sung by our Cathedral choir so majestically in the Roland Martin composition that is also hauntingly rendered on YouTube under the title, "Farewell to Dale." The verse reads:

A HEART alone  
Is such a stone,  
As nothing but  
Thy pow'r doth cut.  
.....  
Oh, let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,  
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.

Thus my heart alone, apart from the power of Jesus' commandment, is such a hard-hearted stone that I would often turn away from those in need. Thus Christians like me require a commandment to love; we must rely on duty to lay down our lives for those whom we would otherwise ignore or disdain. For "by this," today's epistle declares—

by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him (1 John 3:19-22).

Heaven forbid, however, that we should be found among those who hear this judgment rendered against us.

depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:41-45).

Rather, Christian friends, let us do the works of love and so please God as shepherds in our own right as imitators of our Lord himself who is always reminding us, in these words from today's gospel:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd (John 10:16).

Church friends, in that "one flock," and under that "one shepherd," may we also remember our call to shepherd other souls just as we also are being shepherded. Thus we will make the right decision whether we follow the direction of one arrow or the other: whether the direction of being shepherded by someone giving up their life for us, or the direction of shepherding others by giving up our lives for them. For:

*The Lord is my Shepherd I shall also. Amen!*

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