

Psalm 23

John 10:22-30

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Recall last week, in our gospel passage, we had for the second week in a row post Easter yet another resurrection appearance of Jesus. This scene ended with the risen Lord questioning Peter three times if he loved Him. Each time, Peter confessed his love for Jesus and each time Jesus responded with an invitation to Peter to be participant in the work Jesus was sent to do. Jesus called Peter out of the sin of his denial of Jesus, out of the sin of his abandonment of Jesus, and once again revealed the power of the resurrection to transform death into life. Resurrection does indeed change everything. And in our text last week we see that through the resurrection Peter has entered into an even closer relationship with his risen Lord as Jesus calls him to do the following: “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” And finally, “Feed my sheep.” Peter, a sheep himself in need of the guidance, protection, and love of the divine Shepherd has now been entrusted to partner in the very same work the great Shepherd has been doing. Resurrection has transformed the relationship. The appearance of Jesus once again has possibly calmed the disciple’s fears, set their ship on the proper course, and reminded them they are not alone.

Two post-resurrection scenes of Jesus making himself known (and truthfully three if we include Saul’s (aka Paul) encounter with the risen Jesus on the road, which

we also heard last week). It only seems logical in this Easter season to continue on with another appearance of the resurrected Lord. But, instead we find ourselves suddenly transported backward in John's gospel to a time before Jesus' death and resurrection. I don't personally know how many wonderfully gifted scholarly minds collaborated together in giving life to this lectionary of biblical readings used throughout many of our congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and beyond within congregations in other denominations. I don't know the thought process behind why we go so abruptly from post-resurrection appearances to a scene so much earlier in the context of Jesus' ministry. In many ways, it just doesn't make a whole lot of sense; however, I think it is safe to say that while no lectionary is perfect, there was certainly much prayer put into crafting this lectionary and we trust the Spirit was at work in breathing this lectionary into being. We trust that through what we can't fully understand God continues to be at work speaking to us anew and the risen Christ meets us exactly where we are.

While I don't fully understand why they did what they did; I do have one thought, which surfaced this week. One thing we have to keep in mind about the gospel of John is the setting in which he was writing. The community to which John was writing too was undergoing great persecution. Many of these early followers were being thrown out of the synagogue for their belief in Jesus. Many were being cast aside, viewed as spiritual lepers, and left in an extremely vulnerable position. Many were suffering the

very same fate as Jesus did. The very same fate which Jesus predicted Peter would endure last week – that of martyrdom. Certainly, there was a great deal of fear in this young community. Certainly, there may have been many who felt lost, alone, and even overcome by the hatred being cast their way. Certainly, there may have been a struggle to see the risen Lord present with them. Certainly, many may have been forgetting exactly whose they were and succumbing to the temptation to simply abandon the early church and their faith. And perhaps, some were even responding to the hostility directed toward them and the fear they were experiencing through the means of revenge, retaliation, and fighting fire with fire. It is into this that John writes. In our gospel passage today, John reminds them just who the Shepherd they are called to follow is and He reminds they are His sheep. He is Jesus and He is one with God. He is the Shepherd who has revealed His great love for the sheep by giving of His life. He is the great Shepherd who called out from the cross, “Father forgive them.” He is the eternal Shepherd who turned the other cheek rather than striking with a sword. He is the Shepherd of love who opens eyes, heals, feeds, and watches over the flock. He is the Shepherd of peace who calls to us in the midst of our fears and leads us to green pastures and still waters. He is the Shepherd who transforms our vision from scarcity into vision of God’s abundance. He is the Shepherd who meets us in the midst of evil and dark valleys and leads us by the light of His presence. He is the Shepherd who loves us even when we feel no one else does.

And this is the word I needed to hear coming off of last week's passages. Yes, they were beautiful texts in which Jesus commissions Peter, and subsequently the church and all who follow this great Shepherd to be co-workers in the mission of God in the world. They give us a call. They give us meaning. They invite our response to God's gracious activity in and through the death of Jesus Christ. It is a transformational message just as we saw how Saul was transformed and even given a new name – Paul. Yet, they are also daunting texts. It can be downright frightening, overwhelming, exhausting, frustrating, and often a lonely place in trying to respond to our call to participate in God's mission. This road, as Jesus reminded Peter and Paul last week, often is accompanied by suffering. On this journey, we often may feel as if we have failed. We often are met by unwelcome responses. We often fall into despair our efforts are not making a difference. We often encounter apathy. We often encounter excuses. We often are tempted by voices which promise instant success and an easy path. We often are swayed into following a voice, which is not that of our Shepherd. We often forget we are still sheep and simply need to stop, listen, follow, and receive the love, guidance, protection, and life the Shepherd gives. We often are overcome by the evil in the world and fail to see God's goodness in creation. We often are led to think we are in control of our own destiny. We often forget it is our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to the almighty Shepherd.

I could be wrong and probably am; but, I am going with it anyway because either way I needed this passage from John and the church's beloved Psalm 23 this morning and I suspect many of you and others throughout the church do as well. Being a sheep isn't always easy and being a sheep in this world means living in the midst of evil with wolves lurking around every corner. The call the good Shepherd invites us into does often result in us being afraid and encountering the very real sense of being separated and alone from the Shepherd. And that is why, like John's community, and like the people of God throughout the ages have needed to continually and constantly hear the voice of the Shepherd call out with the promise that even in our darkest valleys and deepest fears we are not alone. The Good Shepherd is with us. We are sheep even despite our insecurities, fears, sin, brokenness, and often failure to listen and heed the voice of the Shepherd. Yet, we continue to be sheep – beloved sheep basking by the calm and cool waters shimmering in the brightness and warmth of the light of Christ. The light which guides us out of the darkness of fear, sin and death and gives us the strength and guidance to move forward. Amen.