

*Journeying through the Revised Common Lectionary*  
Readings, Commentary, and Discussion Questions for April 22, 2018  
Fourth Sunday of Easter



## THE READINGS

### First Reading: Acts 4:5-12

<sup>5</sup>The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, <sup>6</sup>with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. <sup>7</sup>When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”

<sup>8</sup>Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup>if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup>let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. <sup>11</sup>This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’ <sup>12</sup>There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

*Worth Noting: Peter speaks truth to power and accuses accusers. Have you experienced such a moment in your life? (You may have called out the hypocrisy of a church or business leader. Or a child or spouse may have called out your hypocrisy.)*

### Psalm 23

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup>he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

*Worth Noting: To be in the care of a shepherd is to be a part of a flock so that, while usually thought of as a psalm of personal trust and piety, Psalm 23 maintains the conviction that the deliverance of the individual occurs only within the community. It was the LORD that provided manna in the wilderness, who escorted the Hebrew people for forty years like a shepherd with his flock, who prepared food for them as they traversed the lands of their enemies. Would you rather be part of a flock or a single sheep?*

### **Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24**

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.<sup>17</sup> 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?<sup>18</sup> Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.<sup>19</sup> And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him<sup>20</sup> whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.<sup>21</sup> Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;<sup>22</sup> and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

*Worth Noting: Does verse 17 mean that God's love no longer abides in one who refuses another help or does it mean that one who refuses another help displays a lack of God's love? If the former, is God's love contingent on helping others? If the latter, is it a corollary that all who help others demonstrate that they abide in God's love, regardless of their faith?*

### **Gospel: John 10:11-18**

<sup>11</sup> [Jesus said] "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.<sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,<sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.<sup>18</sup> 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."

## **CONNECTING WITH THE SCRIPTURES**

### **Entering into the Scriptures**

It is usually assumed that Jesus told the parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18) to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection. Careful readers note, however,

that the metaphor fails when it praises a shepherd who dies in the defense of the flock and thereby exposes the now defenseless flock to greater danger. Perhaps more importantly, the application of the parable would seem to imply that only the reader who dies in the place of another is a good shepherd.

John's Greek is more ambiguous than this. In both 1 John 3:16 and in the Gospel "lay down a life for" could as easily and more naturally be translated "give a life for the sake of others." In other words, Jesus asks us to dedicate our lives to the service of others. This would also be in accord with John's understanding that Jesus came down to devote his life to others. It is also in accord with the high value that Paul put on the adaptability of Jesus, who did not consider divine honors something to be held onto but accepted a life of a mortal (Philippians 2:6-11). For the contemporary reader of the Gospel, the difference in emphasis makes the image of the Good Shepherd at once more realistic and, just because it *is* more realistic and because it requires a life-time commitment to other people, more difficult. The Good Shepherd does not succeed in one-time battles with the wolf, but in the day-to-day care of a flock, guiding them to green pastures, nursing them through illness, and watching them grow. That is, sharing her life with the flock.

### **Breaking Down Our Silos**

Many issues have been addressed recently about the proper use of social media. One of the implications may be that because of the proliferation of ways we learn about the world – including digital media, cable news, radio talk shows, newspapers, news magazines – we experience over stimulation of our senses and our brains. Is it a wonder that so many of us live in media silos, reading papers, listening to programs, and associating with those who already agree with us? We wish that this were not so, but often are reluctant to bring up for discussion the issues that really concern us with people in a different silo.

Enter the Bible. *Journeying* believes that group reading and reflection on the Bible can make a start in getting us out of our silos and into the acres of produce that fill the silos. (Okay, so that image didn't work all that well.) To the Biblical text, each of us brings our hopes and fears. Reading together a text like the Good Shepherd gives us an opportunity to explore – tentatively, gently, honestly – the emotions the story elicits and the attitudes beneath those emotions. Some of us, at some point in our life, may recoil at being called "sheep." At other times, we will take great comfort in the image of a God who protects us from the "wolves" of the world. Or we may be inspired to ourselves be a good shepherd for those unable to defend themselves, as a teacher, parent, priest, first responder, social worker, politician. And we may wonder whether a shepherd who risks his own death, and thereby exposes his flock to even greater danger respects the virtue of prudence. Or does lay down one's life mean to dedicate one's life to the benefit of the flock?

One caveat: The Bible does not have a single, unalterable meaning. The Bible contradicts itself. The Bible is filled with open-ended stories whose meaning we are left to discern. The Bible presents many images of God and many examples of human-divine relationships. And as we experience changes and growth in our lives, the Bible speaks differently, the stories take on new meanings.

But it helps to remember: It's never fake news when two or three gather to explore their common identity – humans, concerned citizens, children of God.

## Questions for Discussion

Who has served as a shepherd in your life? When have you been a shepherd?

There aren't many real live shepherds (who actually care for sheep) left these days. How would you rewrite the parable of the good shepherd today? Would your model be a farmer? teacher? parent? work supervisor? cleric? first responder? soldier?

Do you regularly have important discussions with people who vote differently than you do? What are the circumstances that permit that kind of conversation to take place when it is hard to do so with other people?



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*Unless expressly stated otherwise, all quotations from Scripture are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.*

*The image "Shepherds moving their sheeps, between Khoy and Pasak-e Sofla, north-western Iran" was made by Fabien Dany. [www.fabiendany.com](http://www.fabiendany.com).*

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