



• GREENSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA •

## Other Sheep?

Psalm 23 & John 10:11-18

Easter 4 - April 21, 2024

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We have all heard the term ‘comfort food.’ When I say that term, what do you think of immediately? Some would answer ‘Steak and potatoes.’ Others would supply ‘Granola and yogurt.’ Still others, especially from this area, might say, ‘Anything from DeLallo’s!’

The passages we have read this morning might be considered the comfort food of scripture. The Twenty-third Psalm does not need any further explanation of why it is comforting to us. It causes us to know that we are cared for by God; we are comforted by these words.

The reading from the Gospel of John extends a bit of the theme of that famous psalm and Jesus, in essence, applies it to himself, saying that he is the Good Shepherd. He is, in a sense, the incarnation of the Twenty-third Psalm right there in the midst of his disciples and right here and now in the midst of our world and our struggles and our failures and our hopes and our dreams. The intent of this little snippet of gospel writing is obvious: Jesus is OUR Good Shepherd, not just THE Good Shepherd.

And it is here, exactly here, that we might get ourselves into a bit of trouble with this text. We have such a tendency to over-personalize and appropriate scripture that we sometimes bring it too close and make it too individual as if it is all about us. In a sense, we begin to make it exclusively our own and forget that this text is not JUST directed to us, but to all the followers of Jesus Christ and maybe, the whole world itself.

This is why Presbyterian pastors on the whole have an intense concern for that favorite hymn of some: ‘In the Garden.’ I know that this puzzles a good number of folks who suggest this hymn for funeral services only to have the pastor grimace a bit and then relent. Here’s why the hymn is a bit on the edge: because of its tendency to overplay and find of great importance the individual’s relationship to Jesus Christ. The words of the hymn tempt us to think that we are Christ’s only concern; that we are the only ones who are cared for by the Christ; that Christ is only and supremely MY Good Shepherd rather than OUR Good Shepherd and the Good Shepherd to all humanity. That is the temptation and I suppose it can be avoided even in the singing, but I’m always one who says its better to safe than sorry.

The text for this day actually belies the assertion of the hymn that the joy we have with Jesus is not known or is not accessible to others; of course, it is. Here in the text, Jesus makes it

quite clear to the disciples that they are not the extent of Jesus's reach in this world. He says to them these intriguing words:

**And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.**

Now some have asserted that this is proof positive that Jesus was an alien, who came to earth in a UFO and is returning to gather all those from his galaxy far away and long ago. I don't think you need to hear me comment on that to get the drift of what I think of that.

No, this statement that Christ makes is not about other worlds, but rather our world and the great inclusive nature of God's work in Jesus Christ. Jesus knows that his disciples, like us and like all people, have a tendency to find comfort in the sameness of things; we tend to be most comfortable with folks who think like us, dress like us and act like us. There is great danger in a church believing that somehow sameness is at the root of what it means to be included in the kingdom of God. It is not sameness that includes us; it is Jesus Christ, Lord of lords and King of kings AND the Good Shepherd for all the world.

I like what Dean Lueking, a retired Lutheran pastor has to say about this:

**[One] view of the other sheep is to stereotype them, thinking that church folk all dress, think, talk, act alike. I fall into that trap too. Recently I was called by a funeral director to conduct a funeral where, as he said, three or four at most would be present. I arrived to find the chapel jammed with theater people gathered in remembrance of their fellow actor.**

**Ponytails and lots of leather were in evidence; their stories about the deceased, their songs, verse, and readings were done with great style.**

**After nearly an hour, a woman stepped up to explain why I was asked to come and do what I do. Last summer the deceased man's mother had died, and I had the graveside service. As I was going to another event not far from the cemetery immediately after the committal, I wore a sport coat that is the greenest green I've ever seen, let alone worn. The son said to his friend after I left the graveside, "Any preacher who can wear a sport coat like that can't be all bad; when I die get him for my funeral." So, she did.**

**We're all given to stereotyping people for purposes of exclusion. But when eyes are fixed on this Good Shepherd who knows that the other sheep are not lost sheep but his sheep, the blinders fall away, and the church gets really interesting.**

Amen!