

Home Church Package for Sunday Apr 25, 2021

Materials curated/prepared by Rev. Jenn Swanson

Welcome

We are in the Season of Easter and beginning a new series called W.A.I.T. which is an acronym for Watch, Ask, Imagine, Trust.

After Easter, Jesus' disciples watch what is happening. They experience Jesus in a new way...encountering him on the road to Emmaus, in the upper room, by the lakeshore...asking and trying to understand what is happening, trying to imagine life without Jesus in the earthly form in which they knew him...trusting somehow all will be well.

We are also in a time of waiting. We are watching our world close by and afar for what is going on, and we are asking when we will be able to get to some sense of normal, trying to imagine living differently, and trusting that somehow we will be able to flourish and grow and thrive.

Through this series we are going to explore how the disciples waited and the questions they asked. We will see how they and we can imagine and trust the Living Spirit of Jesus in a new time.

This is our last series collaborating together as Golden Ears, Inlet, and Como Lake United Churches. We really look forward to these next 5 weeks together.

So, welcome to worship. We trust that the Risen Christ, the living spirit of Jesus, will meet you here.

Opening Prayer

(Celtic Benediction – Philip Newell – page 2)

I watch this morning for the light
that the darkness has not overcome.
I watch for the fire that saw in the beginning
and that burns still in the brilliance of the rising sun.
I watch for the glows of life
that gleams in the growing earth
and glistens in sea and sky.
I watch for your light, O God,
in eyes of every living creature
and in the ever-living flame of my own soul.
If the grace of seeing were mine this day
I would glimpse you in all that lives.
Grant me the grace of seeing this day.
Grant me the grace of seeing. Amen.

Scripture: John 10: 11-18 (NRSV)

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. 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.

Psalm 23: The Divine Shepherd, A Psalm of David (NRSV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
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.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
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.

Sermon – John 10: 11-18 (The Good Shepherd)

(By Rev. Jenn Swanson)

Did you know that sheep have amazing memories? In a study conducted on sheep memory, it was discovered that sheep can recognize up to 50 different other sheep faces and remember them for up to two years! Other studies have shown they can also learn to navigate complex mazes and remember them. They are highly social animals and have complex emotions...and get this...scientific studies have shown that sheep can feel happy, sad, afraid, bored, and can even be identified as being optimists and pessimists! They also have an incredible sense of smell and have scent glands in front of their eyes and on their feet...(how handy would that be??) AND they have rectangular pupils that allow them to have a 270 to 320 degree field of vision. Where did I learn all this fascinating stuff about sheep? On the BCSPCA website....and there were more interesting sheep facts there so you can go read that for yourself. ¹

All this to say that while sheep might be smelly, they are definitely not dumb and do not just do things mindlessly as sometimes we, who maybe don't know much about sheep, are led to believe. So while to be called a "sheep" might often be meant to be derogatory...it wasn't always so.

Congregations used to be called "Flocks" and that wasn't negative. (I guess the pastor was the "s" shepherd.) Sunday school teachers would shepherd their young charges. If you've ever chaperoned an elementary school or high school trip (taking 30 grade 7 students to Quebec City for 8 days)... you will very much understand a bit about being a shepherd.

Sheep and their shepherds were useful examples in Jesus' time because they were so common, and every single person encountering Jesus and stories about him would have had some direct or indirect experience with sheep or shepherds, and so using shepherd imagery to represent Jesus and the sheep to represent his followers was a perfect illustration. Everyone listening could relate. There were lots and lots of shepherds around.

So we have smart and rather interesting and ubiquitous sheep and we have a shepherd....but not just any shepherd...we have a "Good shepherd" in our John text this morning and to be honest, I did not much get past the word "good" when considering this text. That word stopped me and got me wondering a few things.

The imagery of a "Good Shepherd" or of a skilled and caring shepherd began long before Jesus, and many of Jesus' followers would have been familiar with this theme of the promised messiah as a "shepherd" because these words were used in the writing of the prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel.² Psalm 23 that we will hear sung in a bit, refers to God as the shepherd and even talks about some of the tools shepherds used like the rod to fend off predators and the staff to rescue stray sheep and pull them out of bushes or awkward places they might get into. The people living in the time of Jesus would know and completely get these references.

¹ <https://spca.bc.ca/news/facts-about-sheep/>

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/4/17/the-good-shepherd-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-4b>
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But what about the word “good”? What about “Good Shepherd” as far as Jesus was concerned? What does that mean?

Well, typically if something is good, then it isn't bad, right?

And If we read this text with that default understanding of the word good....meaning not bad, and therefore meaning the club we want to be in and not out of....then we end up in that good versus bad situation... where there are good guys and bad guys...where someone is right and someone is therefore wrong...where we are on the left or the right or in this camp or the other camp. This definition of the word “good” brings us smack into the middle of dichotomy...into dualistic thinking...into measuring ourselves against it in moral terms...into the struggle of who is right and who is wrong that we are SO familiar with in our time and context...and I don't know about you...but this exhausts me! I am very very tired of trying to be good and of following all the rules and wearing my mask and staying home and then I see hundreds of people on a beach and I feel utterly defeated....and the judging and the arguing and the who is being good and who isn't...ugh. Just make it stop.

And so I am not sure how reading the word “good” in this way...in moralistic terms...serves us because it just seems like more work to try to do better and to try to be more good like Jesus was, which of course is what we want to do, don't get me wrong, but honestly it is not easy.

When was the last time you thought a not nice thought or judged someone else, even inside your head? When did you feel resentful last about having to do the right thing, even though the right thing sometimes seems so hard? How often have you beat yourself up about thinking or feeling or doing or saying something that wasn't at all “what Jesus would do”?

And I also wonder if we were meant to continually measure ourselves and our behaviours and thoughts and faithfulness against Jesus' to try to be even a fraction as “good”, or is this just an uphill Sysephian exercise that most of us will never complete? Of course we want to be good people and mostly we are...but the idea that it's never quite good enough...ah...there's the rub.

And of course I think Jesus was a good guy...I would not be doing this if I didn't...and you wouldn't be here if you didn't either...but what if there is more? I wonder if we might ask: is there another way to think about Jesus and the word “good”?

Linnea Good, in her blog this past week, talked about how this “fix-it-and-be-better theology” has led her to the end of a road in the desert of late.

I'm right there with her.

I feel like I don't know how to fix much right now. I've been trying and trying and staying home and being “good” and following the rules and so have so many of us and still we are in the middle of the muck...and I'd rather be saying, “Jesus, just take the dang wheel, already!”

Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber said in a podcast I listened to recently that she has never once experienced transformation through trying harder. Transformation instead comes through inspiration and grace.

This is not to say we should just give up being the best versions of ourselves we can possibly be...that's right and noble...but what if we stopped for a moment and just watched...opened our eyes and saw something a little differently?

What if by "Good" in this case, we didn't mean "not bad"?

The Greek term for "good" is kalos (ka-loss) which doesn't mean morally good at all, but instead means "genuine" or "true" or "real".

"I am the true shepherd". "I am the genuine shepherd". "I am the real shepherd."

Remember that people were waiting (and watching and asking and imagining and trusting) that the messiah that was prophesied of for centuries in all the stories people had ever heard...would be coming and up until and during and long after Jesus appeared on the scene, there were other people who claimed to be the messiah but were indeed not.

So the idea that Jesus (according to John), is the real deal...the true or genuine shepherd makes a whole lot more sense to me than to say he is good...as in not bad.

And wait! (See what I did there?) What if...we could let go of the word "Good" as a moral definition, and instead focus on "Good" meaning real...and then as verse 10b (which comes before the verses we heard today) says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

As the writer of the Salt Project blog says:

The goal of the true shepherd's work is to give the sheep abundant life. And what is "abundant life"? According to John, it's a life of love and intimacy with God.³

The Good Shepherd's work is to give the sheep (us) a life of love and intimacy with God.

Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh.

Isn't that just Good News? Real news? Genuine and true news? The idea that Jesus in all that he is teaching, is shepherding us (the smart and complex sheep who follow him), into abundant life...into a life full of love and intimacy with God...and with Jesus we are to watch what he does and to ask questions so that we grow in faith and to use our imaginations and ultimately to trust...and in all of it, we can rejoice in this gift because it is real.

And this Kingdom, this grace, this message is for all of us...and it is unmeasured. Good is real.

The Lord is my Shepherd...I shall not want.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

³ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/4/17/the-good-shepherd-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-4b>
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Benediction

As we close this time together, remember:

God is always with you. No matter what you face,
no matter what trials or hardships come your way,
God is right beside you, always filling your cup to overflowing,
guiding and directing your path.

So, acknowledge your fear and your worry
and know it is as true and holy as any feeling,
including joy and hope and love.

Take heart! This is the heart of the matter.

Amen.