

Good morning church! On this, the fourth Sunday of Easter, I bring you greetings on behalf of Bishop Kevin Strickland, your Southeastern Synod Staff, and your fellow disciples across Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee. I'm Pastor Justin Eller, Assistant to the Bishop for Latinx Ministry Initiatives, and it's a privilege to be able to be with you in God's word today!

So, this is traditionally known as the Good Shepherd Sunday when we hear stories of how God continues to lead us time and time again.

In our first reading, we hear the story of Peter and John, after having been arrested for continuing to teach the people about Jesus...that in him there is the resurrection of the dead, and how their testimonies had attracted about 5,000 believers...they now stood as prisoners before the religious rulers, elders, scribes and the high-priestly family being interrogated. We can imagine that they were in a state of distress or crisis. So, who did they trust? // Well, they trusted in the cornerstone rejected by the builders, the one through whom salvation comes. ///

And we hear in our second reading about the discipleship lifestyle, of laying down our lives for one another, especially another in need. / To be a sibling in need and yet be refused help by siblings in Christ who have the world's goods at their fingertips feels like a calamity. But who would they trust, who would come to their aid? // They trusted in the God of Compassion who is greater than our hearts attempting to love. ///

And then there's the episode from John's Gospel when Jesus proclaims that HE is the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep, and not just some of the sheep, but ALL of the sheep. / Jesus is the courageous shepherd, ready to fight against the wolves wanting to snatch and scatter the sheep. The threat of stealing and snatching sheep by the wolves of the world feels disastrous. So, who would they trust? Who will we trust? // Many come to trust in Jesus as the Good Shepherd. ///

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It's possible that after the Lord's Prayer, one of the most quoted scriptures is the 23rd Psalm. And I bet if I asked you right now to begin reciting it, many of you could do so by heart. // Psalm 23 is a song of TRUST, / and according to Professor Kelly Murphy, "**Songs of trust have two things in common: a crisis of some kind and trust that the crisis or disaster shall pass and all will be well.**" //

There are many flocks today surrounded by threats or crises.

There are flocks of migrants around the globe constantly on the move, whether by choice or by force, in search of life-giving lands. //

There are flocks of victims and survivors reeling from the human-caused disasters of endless mass shootings and gun violence. //

There are flocks of black, brown, indigenous, and people of color who can't breathe because the knee of white supremacy and rampant racism is on their necks. //

There are flocks who struggle under illnesses of mind, body, or spirit. //

There are whole flocks threatened by the wolves of poverty, hunger, injustice, and unemployment. //

Lord knows we live in a time full of crises, but songs of trust have two things in common, a crisis and the trust that the crisis shall pass.

While we don't quite know the particular crisis the 23rd Psalmist was responding to, we can hear it as a reminder to us of it's good news, of the steadfast relationship between God and God's people. // Listen anew to Psalm 23 with ears that long for hope and truth and action...//

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.** // God is your faithful shepherd, the one who leads you and sustains your life. God took care of God's people as they wandered through the desert. To be sure, life wasn't always easy and life still isn't promised to be easy -- but it is life with your shepherd by your side.//

**The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul, and guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.** // When God led the Hebrew people into

freedom, it was on dry ground surrounded by raging waters. Danger and crisis are ever present along routes to freedom, but God is our source of being and movement, God is our fountain of peace and restoration, and we hold watch in love for those who search for food, water, and safe passage.

**Even though I walk through the shadowy-est valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff -- they comfort me.** // Life is full of ups and downs, of bright moments of joy and deep pits of suffocating shadows. But you have a God who is with you, / always, / who celebrates with you and cries with you. Even as you stumble your way through the hardest valleys of life, the Shepherd accompanies the sheep, keeping you moving toward life, even when it's life everlasting.

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil, and my cup overflows.** // This Psalm doesn't negate the reality of enemies, but they watch as God's love claims you as God's own, / feeds you with Godself / and pours out a love that is unstoppable. That's the love that empowers you to fight against the wolves and remain strong when facing those who wish you harm.

**Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.** // God shepherds you every day you wake up with the breath of life in your lungs. When goodness and mercy have felt lacking, this is a message of radical resurrection hope that can carry you into the presence of the Lord. //

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And while we struggle against the threatening undercurrents of hopelessness and brokenness, God's stories of hope and songs of trust hold onto us!

Because God worked to liberate in the Exodus,  
and God worked to return God's people from the Exile,  
and God worked to empty the tomb,  
and God worked to empower Peter and John before the interrogators,  
and God worked in followers' hearts to help siblings in need  
and God continues to work that resurrection power in our life everyday,  
preparing us for Godself, while we lean into this God's ultimate song of trust: Jesus' resurrection and we listen for the Good Shepherd's voice proclaiming: Jesus LIVES!//

Let it be so!