

Good Shepherd, Bad Shepherd, Best Shepherd

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

Sermon text: O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*

Shepherds. We need them, otherwise we tend, as the old Prayer Book has it, to wander like lost sheep, following too much the devices and desires of our hearts. And besides, it a deep instinct, we are social animals, to follow leaders (as well as to wander and complain about them). The question is what or rather whom to follow. There are good shepherds and bad shepherds. And there is, we believe, the best of all possible shepherds, Jesus.

Good news this week.

Habemus Papam: Robert “Bob” Prevost, Chicago born, Peru missionary, doctor of canon law. He took the name Leo XIV, invoking Leo XIII and his encyclical defending the rights and dignity of the working class against the predations and rank injustice of unfettered capitalism; while also defending the rights of private property against socialist appropriation. A key founder of catholic social teaching. Also Leo I the great, contemporary of St Augustine, pope of Rome in decline, negotiated with Attila the Hun to retreat, defender of orthodoxy and establisher of the primacy of the see of peer. Illustrious forbears indeed. We will pray for him as he leads our great sister church.

Oh and there are plenty of bad shepherds out there, right? Let me read a bit from an alarming story also in the papers this week:

PEOPLE ARE LOSING LOVED ONES TO AI-FUELED SPIRITUAL FANTASIES
Self-styled prophets are claiming they have "awakened" chatbots and accessed the secrets of the universe through ChatGPT
By MILES KLEE Rolling Stone, may 4

According to the Times, a Reddit thread on r/ChatGPT that made waves across the internet this week. Titled “Chatgpt induced psychosis,” the original post came from a 27-year-old teacher who explained that her partner was convinced that the popular OpenAI model “gives him the answers to the universe.” Having read his chat logs, she only found that the AI was “talking to him as if he is the next messiah.” The replies to her story were full of similar anecdotes about loved ones suddenly falling down rabbit holes of spiritual mania, supernatural

delusion, and arcane prophecy — all of it fueled by AI. Some came to believe they had been chosen for a sacred mission of revelation, others that they had conjured true sentience from the software.

“Warning signs are all over Facebook. She is changing her whole life to be a spiritual adviser and do weird readings and sessions with people — I’m a little fuzzy on what it all actually is — all powered by ChatGPT Jesus.”

Wow, there’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Let’s try to steer clear of this one shall we?

And then there’s the best shepherd.

And one of the most beloved passages in all of scripture helps us think and pray about him. Psalm 23. And I will take the remaining part of this sermon to go over the 6 verses of the psalm—which you may find in your leaflet, or you may follow along in the unsurpassed King James Version in your Prayer Book on page 476, as part of the old Burial Rite One (also on that page, another modern translation —and not a good one).

It begins: The Lord—God, Jesus—is my shepherd and I shall not want. I have what I need: maybe not as much as I’d like but I am not “in want.” Nor will I want some other shepherd—this one, Jesus, is tried and true—tried by death but true to his promise of having life within. This one will lead me to green pastures and still water. This one will provide me with both food for the body, and purpose and meaning for the mind.

He restoreth my soul—body and mind together, soul as whole person. And leads on righteous paths. Paths that will not lead me to soul destruction. Paths of good works, mercy, justice and truth. Paths of life, not death. All for his Name’s sake.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” —which is one of the greatest lines of poetry in English literature; we must not translate it poorly. Yes, sometimes we must go there, the valley of the shadow of death, go through there, even live there for a time, pass through the sharp ravine where the shadows come early and death lurks behind every rock—and sense there in the shadows, the fear. Yes, there is evil.

But I fear no evil—for thou art with me—note how the psalm moves from third person description of the Lord to personal address: you are with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Yes I must walk through the valley but even there I can hear the voice of the good shepherd who calls me, even me, by name. He knows me and I know him. He protects and comforts me. I will not fear.

And now, verse 5, the poem moves into out of the valley into open and welcoming space—but no longer fields and streams. But a house, the house of the Lord, where there is a table laden with good things. Thou preparest a table before me. I am no longer merely given what I need so as not to lack, not to want. Now the table is spread with all good things—there is abundance. And here is an odd note: the table is spread even in the presence of my enemies—and that may include my own sense of unworthiness, my own wolf's nature. We have enemies—those who oppose us, differ from us, those we don't love or like—but God does. And perhaps this gathering is part of but God's plan to gather the greater flock that Jesus speaks of when he said to the disciples in a resurrection appearance that he must go to their other flocks and they will hear his voice and there will be one flock one God.

Not only is the speaker no longer a lowly sheep, but a human, with other humans, seated at the table. And not only that, thou anointest my head with oil: the speaker is anointed with oil—as the prophets anointed kings. I am not only seated at the feast but my cup overflows. I am not only free from want but in possession of abundance, great joy, even eternal life.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life—all the days, even when I do not see or feel the presence of the good shepherd, days when I seem to be lost and alone, prey or predator, even then I see now I am surrounded and filled with the presence and goodness of God in Christ. Alleluia.

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. This house this earth this heaven contains fields and mountains, rivers and seas; it is a kind of cosmic dwelling place of the Lord. A cosmic mansion of many rooms. a place that Jesus has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us, who has opened the gate—he who is the Gate, the paschal Lamb of John—alleluia, the risen one the leading edge, the fearless brave shepherd who has faced down death, who has overcome the grave, who has risen from the dead, who has come back to tell us, do not be afraid but follow him. For he is the good shepherd and he calls us each by name.

If you listen you will hear. And I will leave you with this question: If you hear, will you follow?

In Christ's name, Amen.

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