

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

This morning four of our young people are affirming their baptisms, making for themselves the promises that were made on their behalf by their parents, sponsors, and the congregation years ago. This morning is also when our readings talk about fellowship and breaking of bread and prayers, about “going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” This morning we responsively read the 23rd Psalm which subversively takes to task those who have led Israel and not been faithful shepherds of the people, who have taken advantage of their positions to look after themselves. This morning our gospel reading is from the Good Shepherd himself telling us “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

This sermon is for all of you of course, but I’m especially glad our Confirmands are here to hear it because I asked them many times of the course of the last nine months why what they were learning, and memorizing, was important to their future lives, the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism, and in general, our conversations.

I want to share with you a verse from Acts 4 “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” And of course the name is Jesus Christ.

So let’s talk for a few minutes. “The Lord is my shepherd,” the task of a shepherd is to be faithful in protecting the flock, you might say that God’s task then is to be faithful in tending God’s flock. You and I are God’s flock. Our psalm continues “I shall not want”, but of course we want all we can get! More stuff, more money, more power, more prestige, more of everything. But our Psalm is really telling us that “the Lord is my shepherd, I have all I need,” a remarkable assertion of our trust in our God.

Then we read we lie down in green pastures and we’re led beside still waters, peaceful waters. Think of the still waters of our baptisms when God claimed us as his own, we’re led to green pastures for our souls and led to lie down, you and I receive rich nourishment from the living Word, from Christ’s body and blood in Holy Communion.

And God restores our souls, he knows we stumble, he knows when we are weary, worn out at times, and he takes our burdens from us and carries us when we need carrying, God leads us in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake, worthy by grace through faith alone, in paths of humbly walking with our God, loving and doing mercy and justice. God is faithful and guides and protects those who bear his name.

We walk through the darkest valley, but we fear no evil for God is with us. And when we walk through the darkest valley, when that final valley of the shadow of death overcomes us, we will fear no evil, the Psalm says, for you our Good Shepherd,

our Emmanuel are with us even in the darkest valley, and we talk to our God who prepares a table before us and anoints our heads with oil, our cups overflow even when times are tough and we don't know what to do next. Our very real God is our answer as he comforts us with rod and staff, the Good Shepherd's wooden cross, who leaves everything to find us, giving his very life bearing our sins, freeing us from our sins, for we are his sheep and he brings us back to himself.

I remember a story I heard in my last congregation about a young man who with his father's permission had taken one of his dad's sheep to show somewhere. On the way back to the farm the sheep had escaped the pickup truck and took off into the woods. You may not know it, but sheep can move very fast when motivated and the young man couldn't catch the sheep and though he called it with every trick he knew, the sheep wouldn't come to him. He got his dad who walked a little ways into the woods, called the sheep and the sheep immediately came to him, knowing his voice. He took his sheep home to care for it, feed and water it.

And our Good Shepherd knows us and we know his voice and we respond to him and follow him, and we continue in his teaching and in fellowship, to praying together and breaking bread together, united with our Good Shepherd, and one another, hearing his voice and caring for other sheep through prayers and actions.

We are following, and entering by Jesus, our Good Shepherd we will be saved and find pasture, as he tells us that "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Everlasting, overflowing, abundantly supersized life.

AMEN