

## ENFOLDED BY LOVE

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Towson Presbyterian Church  
May 3, 2009

Psalm 23  
John 10:11-18

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, known traditionally in the church as “Shepherd Sunday.” All the scripture lessons for this Sunday deal with the metaphor of the shepherd of the sheep. Most of us at TPC don’t have much to do with real, live sheep or their shepherds. With the real thing out of sight and mind, we tend to imagine a very domesticated version of what the Bible is really talking about.

In biblical times, the image of the shepherd was not comforting or cuddly. Shepherds were quite cut off from human society, spending most of their time out in the hills with the sheep. “At night time, they herded [the animals] into pens and, if they were seriously committed to their task (in the manner evoked by Jesus today’s gospel [lesson]), they slept out on the hills, too—usually across the gate of the pen. Their job was to find water and grazing for the sheep<sup>1</sup>—not an easy task in the semi-desert. [The most important thing was to keep] the sheep...safe from the predators that lurked in the rocks and caves where skittish or complacent sheep walked in ‘the valleys of the shadow of death’. Leading, feeding and protecting. Shepherding was not a job for the weak. It was one of the most powerful images used to describe Israel’s experience of [God] as protector and provider.

“[It is this image of the shepherd as bulwark and shield that Jesus is using in John 10]: ‘I am the gate’<sup>2</sup> and, in our text this week, ‘I am the good shepherd’. Note that this [second statement follows] immediately from the verse, ‘I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.’ Jesus then moves [directly] into the image of the shepherd whose ‘goodness’ is seen in laying down his life for the sheep. Jesus is not saying, ‘I am the good shepherd because I am *prepared* to lay down my life for the sheep’. [He is not talking] about risk-taking. Jesus is the shepherd who *will* give abundant life to the sheep *at the expense of his own life*.

“This is one of [the episodes in] John’s [gospel where Jesus predicts his own suffering and death. We consider it during this Easter season because this is the time in the church year when we are most concerned with] the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection. [T]he first disciples only came to understand the meaning and significance of Good Friday after Easter Sunday[; in the same way,] we contemporary disciples are led by the Lectionary readings into the meaning of Easter during these post-Easter weeks.

“[You’ve heard me speak before about how devastating the crucifixion was for the original disciples, how it seemed at first to undermine completely] Jesus’ entire

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Psalm 23:2.

<sup>2</sup> John 10:7.

ministry. We have had 2000 years of faith and preaching about the cross. We write sentimental songs and hymns about ‘The Old Rugged Cross’. We wear crosses around our necks as items of jewelry. And yet the cross can never be loved. It was an instrument of torture. It was reserved for the dregs and the most dangerous—it was a political death machine. Those who died in this way were cursed and regarded as sub-human. How was it remotely possible that this would be the fate of God’s Messiah? It was unthinkable.

“[If] the cross [were] the final verdict on Jesus[, it would mean that he was nothing more than] a messianic pretender, a blasphemer, a political agitator[, ] a sham—and moreover, a deadly sham, because he had so many people fooled into thinking that what he said and did was blessed by God. [It would mean that] the source of his power [had been nothing more than] people’s gullibility [and his] personal charisma, [or perhaps even] demonic possession. That was how any good Jew [would have seen] Jesus when they looked at the cross. It was a sign that triggered revulsion.

“And for those who believed in him? The cross was the [end] of all their hopes. Jesus [had not delivered]! All his promises proved worthless. The incredibly powerful vision of the Kingdom turned out to be a pipe dream and a hallucination. And all the promises of liberation—of smashing the powers that bound human beings? [Well, there had been no contest at all. It seemed that ‘might makes right’ after all.] Jesus [hadn’t even been a contender]. And at the end of the day, he wasn’t worth following—not worth putting one’s own life at risk for. What a waste of three years! What stupid, gullible fools the disciples had all been! And now, how were they to live, not only with the death of Jesus but with all the unrealized hopes that he had stirred up and failed so spectacularly to deliver on?

“How does one live with standing on the edge of the Promised Land, seeing it laid out, and then [having] it all taken away? How [do you] ever live with what [you have] when [you’ve] been made so utterly dissatisfied with it—and yet [given] no alternative? [Not exactly] abundant life, is it?

“[What John’s gospel is telling us here in Chapter 10] is that it is precisely through [Jesus’] own death that abundant life will come! Far from the crucifixion *undermining* [hope that Jesus’ promises will] be realized, it is, ironically, the *guarantee* of those promises! The ‘abundant life’ that Jesus promises was the lived experience of the post-Easter community: life in the power of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

“[Yes, ‘[the world] crucified and killed [Jesus]...but God raised him up.’<sup>3</sup> ‘We did one thing, *but God* did another! [We] killed him, God raised him; [we] declared him to be a false prophet and messianic pretender, but God declared him to be both Lord and Messiah; [we] declared him to be a blasphemer, but God declared him to be the Son of God; [we] rejected him like a stone unfit for use, but God declared him to be the most important stone in the whole edifice; [we] declared him to be a political agitator, but God has made him king of the universe!’

---

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:23-24.

“This is what salvation is: it is what *God* does in grace, despite all we do in sin and rebellion. That is why Jesus is the name by which we are saved. There is no other because it is *Jesus* who died and whom God raised.

“Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life. Life laid down voluntarily and deliberately, rather than taken. This is a constant emphasis in the gospel accounts of the post-Easter appearances. The crucifixion wasn’t ultimately some terrible disaster because God had it planned. It wasn’t some terrifying defeat of Jesus because Jesus *chose* the way of the cross.

“John is at pains to tell us, throughout the passion narrative, that Jesus is in control. John’s crucified Jesus is not the God-abandoned, soul-shattered Jesus of Mark’s gospel, but the King who is enthroned. He is in control on the cross.

“Why this particular portrayal? It has led to all sorts of difficulties and a sense that the cross ‘wasn’t really so bad after all’. But that’s only because we’ve missed John’s point. He is trying to hammer home what emerged after Easter Sunday: the contrast between what *appears* to be the case when we look at the crucified Jesus, and the truth, the reality—that God is deeply, marvelously and savingly active in the very midst of this act of deepest sinfulness and self-destructiveness on the part of human beings. We are to look at the cross, then, in the light of the resurrection, if we are truly to see what it tells us about Jesus and God.

“The ‘divine plan’ that is revealed after the resurrection is *not* that God ‘engineered’ all this, but rather that the ‘plan’ is grace! God is acting to save the world in Jesus.<sup>4</sup> And that means that Jesus has to be a volunteer. And whatever humans do—however bad it is—there is the ‘but God...’ which is grace and salvation. And that ‘but God’ is seen no more clearly than in the resurrection.

“[We are enfolded by love. But the love that enfolds us] is tough. It is the sort of love that is embodied (literally) in the shepherd who provides for the sheep and protects them with his life against wild beasts. We know love, says the apostle John, when we see it—and we see it in Jesus laying down his life for us.<sup>5</sup> But that means that those of us who live because of that love ought to live *by* it. So John goes on, ‘... so we ought to lay down our lives for one another!’ Concretely, that means providing for [the] needs [of others when they cannot do it for themselves]<sup>6</sup>—just as a shepherd does for the flock. Love is made real, not in words and fluffy feelings, but in truth and action...<sup>7</sup>

“To be ‘in Jesus’ and to have Jesus ‘in us’ (abiding) means that we will be those who, having experienced God’s love in Christ, live it out in world-transforming, community-shaping actions that are the work of the same Spirit that was ‘abiding’ in Jesus.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> John 3:17.

<sup>5</sup> John 10:16.

<sup>6</sup> John 10:17.

<sup>7</sup> John 10:18.

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Moore, “Tough Love,” *Disclosing New Worlds* (April 28, 2009: Online at <http://lectionary.wolsblog.com/2009/04/28/sermon-for-easter-4b/>)

Today, our Good Shepherd leads us to this table where he feeds us with bread and juice and the power of his Spirit that makes all things new, that overcomes even death. He bids us to come as we are, and he will give us all we need to go forth from this place as shepherds to others and to the world he loves.

Let us pray:

*Gracious God, show us and then give us courage to walk your way. Give us the confidence we need to be your disciples, to take up your cross daily, to ascend the way that leads to life and that eternal. For the sake of your Son, our Lord and Savior. Amen.*