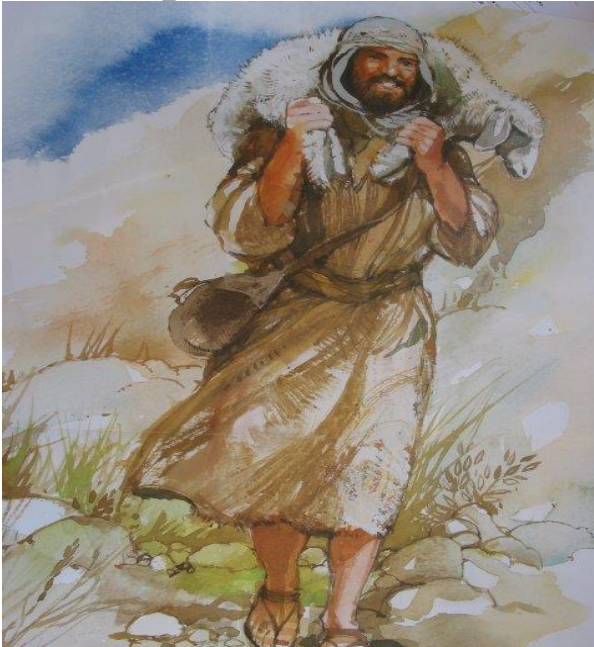


**“The Psalmist Prays”
Service Prayers for
the Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2021**



St. John United Church of Christ
10207 Lincoln Trail
Fairview Heights, IL 62208
Telephone 397-6323
Secretary – Judy Hartman
Rev. Rosemary Captain

Prayers and Liturgy by Rev. Ellis Arnold
Organist – Sharon Banjavcic

Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

CALL TO WORSHIP:

With grace flowing, the poet sings the opening lines of the famous prayer, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

We hear the Psalmist’s contentment and wonder about our own.

Settled on the ground, with grass tickling their toes, the psalmist rests, “God makes me lie down in green pastures. God leads me beside still waters.

God restores my soul.”

We hear their deep need for rest and wonder about our own.

With a deep sigh, the psalmist declares, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me. You prepare a table before me. You anoint me. My cup overflows.

We recognize their bold courage and wonder about our own.

Remembering God’s faithfulness, the psalmist finds words to carry with them, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

We hear their faithful trust and wonder about our own.

Holy Spirit of Rest and Renewal, in this time of worship inspire us with words both ancient and new so that we may find the words that connect us to You.

Amen and Amen.

PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION:

Holy One, we hear the comforting ancient poetry of the psalmist but wonder, is it true?

Will you really provide for what we need?

Will you bring us to a place of rest?

Will you protect us from enemies, even when they share our dinner table?

We confess that rather than being only filled with holy wonder, we are also filled with skepticism at the ancient words. We can quickly tally up the times we didn't feel provided for or protected from danger.

We count the times we could not catch a break when we desperately needed it.

So Holy One, shepherd our busy minds back to the here and now, help our spirits forgive the grudges we hold, and invite us to experience You as truly present.

In these moments of quiet, offer us rest for a moment.

Silence

ASSURANCE OF GRACE:

Beloved People of God, there is wisdom in our questions, but God is steadfast. God's presence is unwavering and will accompany us through every terrifying valley.

God's spirit is unshakeable and will sit with us even in the presence of formidable foes.

God's love is relentless and will offer us goodness and mercy all the days of our life. Amen and amen.

GLORIA PATRI:

Glory to the Creator, the Christ, the Holy Spirit, Three-in-One, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: John 10:11-18

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That's because he isn't the shepherd; the sheep aren't really his. So, the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ He's only a hired hand and the sheep don't matter to him.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.

¹⁷ "This is why the Father loves me: I give up my life so that I can take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I give it up because I want to. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it up again. I received this commandment from my Father."

May the ancient words speak to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen

MESSAGE: "Can you believe it? You are loved."

When I am preparing for a Sunday morning message, first I read all the scriptures suggested by the Common Lectionary. Sometimes I find a phrase that catches my curiosity; words I don't understand or what was the setting for the scripture when it was spoken or written. (Two different things.)

Then I refer to commentaries from different scholars that I trust. Plus, I want to be sure my ideas are not incorrect or way off base. I usually find out something new I didn't know before. Today's scripture is just such an "aha" moment, an epiphany.

"The Good Shepherd" is probably a very familiar message to many of us. Yet I wanted to know more, and I found it. I always knew that Jesus loved us and used this example of a sheep herder to demonstrate this love. Yet, I didn't understand exactly how sheep and love went together.

It seems that there is more to sheep herding in the ancient world than I thought. Raising sheep was actually a very fruitful economy for those who could buy and sell them. The coats of the sheep could be used for warmth for the people. The meat and milk provided protein for the family. Plus, if the owner was smart enough (or shrewd enough), he could breed the best rams and ewes to produce high quality sheep. (Read about how Jacob did it in Genesis 30:29-43.)

In general today's scripture passage draws the contrast between the good and the bad. Commentator William Barclay explained the laws and customs of sheep herding in those days. "The shepherd was absolutely responsible for the sheep. If anything happened to a sheep, he had to produce some kind of proof that it was not his fault. The law laid it down: 'If the dead sheep was mangled by beasts, let it be brought as evidence' (Exodus 22:13)." The idea was that the shepherd must bring home proof that the sheep had died, and that he had been unable to prevent

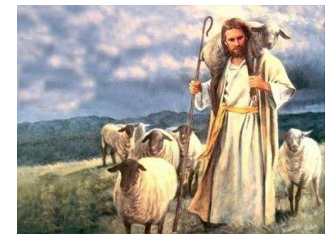
the death. That's how valuable they considered even one sheep.

For example, in the book of 1 Samuel 17:34-36, David (the future King) tells Saul (the present King at the time) how, when he was keeping his father's sheep, he had to battle with the lion and the bear to save the sheep. In the book of Isaiah 31:4 the Prophet speaks of the crowd of shepherds being called out to deal with a different lion.

To the shepherd, it was the most natural thing to risk his life in defense of his flock. Many shepherds lost their lives attempting to fight off robbers and thieves who steal the sheep. Because the sheep were such a treasured commodity, the good shepherd was willing to lay down his life to protect them. That's how much the good shepherd loved his sheep.

On the other hand, there was the unfaithful shepherd. The difference was this. A real shepherd was born to his task. He was sent out with the flock as soon as he was old enough to go; the sheep became his friends and his companions; and it became second nature to think of them before he thought of himself. It's all about the relationship the shepherd has with his flock and the bond they have together. (Remember the story of the lost sheep in Luke 15.)

The false shepherd comes into the job not as a calling but as a means of making money. He was in it simply and solely for the pay he could get. He had no sense of the height and the responsibility of his task; he was only a hireling. If he lost a sheep, he only worried about himself and he would just



leave the rest and go to another region to look for a new job. (There are other examples in the Bible of good shepherds in Ezekiel 34:16 and bad shepherds in Jeremiah 50:6.)

Now I invite you to re-read the description of the good shepherd and call this person “Jesus”. See if Jesus meets this description. And then think about what Jesus has done for his flock which includes all of us. Jesus LOVES us so much that he was willing to lay down his life for us. We humans face dangers every day and Jesus is willing to protect us. Every week we read the confession of our sins, and Jesus is willing to forgive us. We can hear that forgiveness in the assurance of pardon.

There are times in our lives when we don't feel very loved and this story doesn't seem to ring true for us. When no one else cares about us, Jesus reaches out to us and urges us to come back to the flock. He does this because he loves us. He invites us to have an abundant life as a loved person. To make that happen he was willing to be tortured and assassinated for us. NO GREATER LOVE HAS HE FOR YOU AND ME. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Good Shepherd, hasten the day when we can fully realize and believe the depth of your love for us. And in turn, may we spread that love to others who are lost, wandered away, lonely, or hurting physically or mentally.

Mighty God, in Jesus Christ you dealt with spirits that darken minds or set people against themselves and others. Give peace to people who are torn by conflict, are cast down or dream deceiving dreams. By your power, drive from our mind demons that shake confidence and wreck

love. Today we especially pray for those who are so lost that they feel killing others is the only answer to their restless minds. They don't believe the love that you so patiently offer to all of us. Open their hearts and minds to the grace and care you can give them.

We pray that all may go well with our family and friends and that they may be in good health, both physically, mentally, and spiritually. Restore those who are sick in body, mind, or spirit.

Teach us to love as Jesus loves as we pray the prayer he taught us . . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO THE OFFERING:

Like a shepherd tending to those in their care, God has offered us rest and renewal, protection and mercy, love and nourishment. In response, we are invited to give a portion of our time, energy, gifts, and prayers so that others in this world may experience the same.

DOXOLOGY:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God for all that love has done;
Creator, Christ, and Spirit, One.

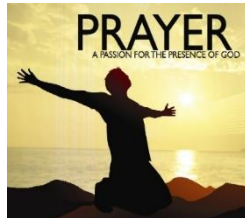
UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION:

Loving God, bless these gifts and all the ways in which we give. May each of our gifts be a part of co-creating and tending to the love, safety, belonging, and dignity You envision for the world. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

As you depart from this place, go with courage and go with trust that the God who created you is also the One who will sustain you and the One who will show you the way. Until we meet again, may you be filled with curiosity, wonder, and openness to God's tender leading. Amen and Amen.

PRAYER LIST: We pray for the health and well-being of all affected by the pandemic and we especially pray for: Urban Baum, Donna Isselhard, Becky Ballard, P.J. Bennett, Nelson Libell, Joe Knapp, Danny Ballard, Jim Garrett



ANNOUNCEMENTS: Please let Judy Hartmann know if you have a graduate in the family. We'll include their name in the May Newsletter. Deadline April 28.

If you have something or an article for the May newsletter, please send it to Judy by April 28.

CELEBRATING PSALMS:

We should remember that the Psalms are the prayer book of our ancestors in faith. They are meant to be sung, recited, pondered, and read. They are meant to speak honestly about the experience of people. They are meant to convey intimacy with God. Some are prayerful pleadings for God to act. Some are simply prayerful reflections on how grief was transformed into trust, fear was transformed into faith, joy shared, contentment cultivated, and praise unrelentingly released. All of them are prayers meant to speak to experience and to give people words to pray when we need the voice of experience and wisdom, or somewhere outside ourselves to turn.

