

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
April 26, 2026 – Good Shepherd Sunday
Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

“The Lord is my shepherd.” These few words that we know so well are truly a great declaration of faith in God’s covenant with us as well as an expression of our relationship with God. Of today’s scripture readings the 23rd Psalm is the most ancient, written sometime between the 9th and 8th centuries B.C.E. The psalmist describes God as a shepherd who leads the sheep to pasture, to waters that are not turbulent but still – and therefore easy to drink from – and through difficult terrain. In a courageous statement of faith the psalmist declares, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

The image of the shepherd’s rod and staff in the hands of God is interesting. With these implements a shepherd prods and guides the sheep and, when necessary, uses the crook of his staff around the sheep’s neck to haul it to safety. Is this what we think of when we hear the word “comfort?” Not likely. The comfort that comes from divine guidance is often not “comfortable” in the sense that we ordinarily use the word. We need to go back to the Latin root of the word “comfort” to understand this line of Psalm 23. The Latin behind our English word means “to strengthen.” While divine guidance may not be easy or soothing or soft, it is strengthening. As we pray in Eucharistic Prayer C, “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength.” We need the strength God offers us.

Think for a moment about your life, in terms of being one of God the Shepherd’s sheep. Has God ever pushed you – maybe with a good, hard shove of that shepherd’s rod – to get you to go in the right direction? Has God ever used that shepherd’s crook to haul you by the neck out of a pit you’ve fallen into? Maybe God is pushing or pulling you right now. The psalmist helps us see that, in goodness and mercy, God pushes us and pulls us and does whatever is necessary to give us the guidance we need to get back on the right and safe path. We may not like the feel of God’s rod and staff, but many of us can look back and see how we have been helped and rescued by what we might call God’s very “uncomfortable” interference!

Nearly a thousand years after Psalm 23 was written, the author of the Gospel of John uses the metaphor of shepherd and sheep to describe Jesus and his relationship with us. In the verse following this morning’s reading Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Jesus uses the ancient metaphor from scripture, applies it to himself, and takes it further. The good shepherd does more than guide and comfort his sheep with rod and staff. He is in relationship with his sheep. “He calls his own sheep by name.” And when the sheep are in danger, the good shepherd willingly lays down his life for the sheep. This is the measure of God’s love for us. This love is the source of the abundant life promised by Jesus to those who follow him.

Today’s passage from The First Letter of Peter addresses the issue of suffering, specifically suffering for being a Christian in a time of persecution. The context is important. Bible passages like this one have been misused, suggesting that people who suffer at the hands of others – servants or slaves, women, children – should suffer in silence, without seeking justice for themselves or an end to their suffering. This is a very convenient teaching for those who hold and abuse power. But this is not what scripture teaches.

I have often made the point that near the end of his life Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem, where he would suffer and die. He was not a powerless victim without resources. As he said to one of his disciples when he was arrested, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, that say it must happen in this way?" (Matthew 26:53-54)

It is unlikely that you or I will be persecuted for our faith. It is unlikely that we will be called upon to bravely choose and face suffering and death for Christ. Many women and men have been persecuted and have chosen to give their lives for their faith in Christ, and we honor some of them in the church today, as you know.

But none of us escapes suffering and death. We are physical beings, and we suffer physical and mental pain and deterioration as well as the death of our bodies. We are emotional beings, and we suffer emotional pain. To love others means to sympathize with their suffering and to feel grief at their loss. Suffering will come. How will we bear it? Will we lash out in our pain and cause pain for others? Or will we act as members of the household of God and, as much as we can, transform our own pain into compassion – to understanding and alleviating the suffering of those around us? The passage we heard this morning from The First Letter of Peter reminds us of the example of Christ: "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." As followers of Jesus, we are called to this model of behavior and faith.

How do we reconcile human suffering and God's love for us? Can human suffering somehow be "God's plan," as some church people believe? I have never been comfortable with that language and point of view. I haven't found it helpful to think that what I have suffered in life is somehow part of God's plan. I haven't found it helpful to think that the suffering of others is somehow part of God's plan. Recently I heard the suggestion to replace the idea of "God's plan for us" with "God's prayer for us." What happens if you ask yourself, "What is God's prayer for me?" "What is God's prayer for the person I love?" "What is God's prayer for all human beings?"

How do we pray for ourselves or for someone we love who is suffering? When I pray with you after our worship service, I often ask God for help and healing, for strength and patience, for the felt knowledge of God's love, and for peace for you or your loved one. I may ask that God guide the person through a time of trouble and guide others to find ways to help. I pray that you and the person you love will know that, safe in God's hands, all will be well in a future not yet known. I think that what we ask from God in prayer for ourselves and others gives us an idea of what God's prayer for us and for all human beings must be. Help, healing, strength, patience, the felt knowledge of God's love, peace, guidance, the help of other people, and especially faith that, in God's hands, all will be well in a future not yet known to us.

As we follow Jesus, we may be strengthened beyond measure by the knowledge that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, the one who was willing to lay down his life for his sheep, the one who shows us God's limitless love for us. In Easter season, when we focus on Christ's resurrection, we affirm our faith that God's love and life and goodness are stronger than all the forces of death and evil. We declare that our shepherd is "the King of love." And we pray with the psalmist, "Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Amen.