

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, May 11, 2025

Let us pray. Faithful God, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts turn our ears to you once again. Let us see you, feel you, and know you in this gathered community and in the reading of your word. Amen.

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John, and, as Jeanene shared with the children, is part of the Good Shepherd discourse. Hear these words from the early church.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

You may have, if you're paying very close attention, noticed a theme in our liturgy and scripture this morning. This, the fourth Sunday in Eastertide, is often called Good Shepherd Sunday because the texts in all three years of the Revised Common Lectionary focus on these imageries of God as Shepherd. This year we also find ourselves in the fourth of, or the third pardon me, of our Eastertide sermon series, entitled *And There Christ Will Meet You*, as we contemplate the ways and places that we interact with the resurrected Christ. So this story today is clearly not a resurrection story but tells us a bit about who we know God to be and how we interact with God. Now coming from a farm girl herself, it's probably wise for us to think a little bit about our imagery of sheep and shepherd, because when I say the term Good Shepherd to you, I'm willing to bet that you imagine this stately image of Jesus in white robes with a lamb across his shoulders and his brown hair and his blue eyes looking very peaceful. At least that's what comes to mind for me when I think of the Good Shepherd, but shepherding is not ever that bucolic. Shepherding is dirty work. It was work that was looked down upon. They were not meek or mild. They were rough and tumble. They were dirty and smelly. Shepherds had to be willing to take on danger and risk to themselves in order to protect the sheep and to hunt down the sheep that

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wandered away. In fact, the shepherd of the 23rd Psalm seems to be so comforting because they're armed to the teeth. They've got a rod in one hand and a staff in the other, because that's what it takes to protect sheep in the wild. Shepherds were in charge of the life and the death of sheep. So culling sheep was their responsibility. Deciding how best an individual sheep could be used—for wool, for milk, or even for meat—rested in the shepherd's hands. It was not just someone who was kind. In modern terms we might be more familiar, it might make more sense for us to hear Jesus say "I am the good migrant worker." That's the kind of impact that it would have had on his community at the time. Now when we think of the term good in English, we imagine like there's good and bad; but the Greek word *kalos* which is translated as good here is so much more complex than that. It means the model, the perfection of something. It also means good, but not just good in a quality sense. It's pointing to the ultimate expression of that thing. Maybe for us to think about the platonic ideal of a shepherd is what the good shepherd is. It's a very biblical model, goes back to our Hebrew scriptures as well as our New Testament scriptures, a model where God is the shepherd that cares for those at risk and the vulnerable. God provides identity and protection. God has tender knowledge of the sheep, calls them by name, our text says, "gathers them together, lays down his life." That is a good shepherd.

I've been thinking this week about the work of the shepherd in calling the sheep into community, to be gathered together to seek those who are lost and to make space for them in the herd. Now that's kind of stuck with me because I feel like we as a people, we humans, we long to see and be seen. We have a very deep desire in us to know and to be known, to be part of a community. That's part of the reason we gather here on Sunday mornings—is to be community together. We look in so many places for that community, and I wonder sometimes if we're always looking in the right places. The text in John tells us that the sheep know the voice of the shepherd, so what voice is it that is leading us, like individually and corporately? I think the text asks us to wrestle with that. What is the voice that is guiding us? Now, I don't know about you, but for me there is a little voice inside of me that is very, very mean, primarily to me but also to other people. It's that voice of doubt in the back of my mind that says it's never enough, I'll never be good enough, smart enough, fast enough. My house will never be clean enough. I'll never be prepared enough. And it's a voice that tells me to distrust those who say that I am. Now, what is particularly insidious about voices like that is if you listen to them too long, you'll begin to stop trying at least in my experience. At my worst I let that voice in my head dictate even when I know it isn't the truth, and I'm sure that we all have voices. They may not be as mean as mine, but there are the guiding voices in our head. Some are good and some aren't great. In the same way we've got voices clamoring for attention outside of us in the world, voices that seem to be focused on who's in and who's out, voices that say might makes right, voices that say the end always justifies the means, voices that say you can't trust anyone. This week in our nation those voices have looked

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like cutting funding to social services like WIC and school lunches while increasing spending on weapons. Those outside voices in the world in Tennessee have looked like an acquittal on all charges for the three officers in the death of Tyree Nichols. Those voices in the world look like ICE arresting American citizens, including the mayor of Newark. There are a cacophony of voices that revel in the intentional infliction of harm, voices that jump from incident to incident and story to story; and it feels like they're just always trying to keep us off balance. External voices of the world that prioritize fear and power and greed, that value life but only on their terms.

An uncle of a close friend of mine, whom I became close with when I was at seminary because he was the only person I knew in Atlanta when I moved there, he still works for the state of Georgia. And as I was getting to know him, he was telling me stories about the leadup to the Atlanta Olympics. There were so many things to be done, much of which building and cleaning and expanding, but Chris and some of his colleagues were tasked with, quite literally, whitewashing the city. They were tasked with making sure that the graffiti was sprayed over; and, most importantly, Chris and his department were tasked with removing unhoused people from downtown Atlanta. Now what they did was kind. It's not like they threw them all in jail. They got them hotel rooms. They got them bus tickets to other cities. They moved them away from downtown for the course of the Olympics, but they did that because they knew that it was infinitely cheaper in the long run to hide them, to put a band-aid on the problem, rather than to do the work to change the systems that kept people on the streets in the first place. It was a calculated choice by those in charge.

Sometimes the voices of the world aren't as big or as visible as the things I've just mentioned. Sometimes they're little everyday acts that prioritize self over others, things that fly in the face of the message taught by the Good Shepherd. On the other hand, friends, we know that the voice of the shepherd might be a little quieter, but it is clear the voice of the shepherd says "The first shall be last."

The voice of our shepherd says "Let the little children come to me."

The voice of our shepherd says "Let those without sin cast the first stone."

The voice of the shepherd says "Be still and know that I am God."

Our shepherd says "Love one another as I have loved you and feed my sheep."

That voice is often in direct conflict with the voices deep inside of us and the voices in the world. Friends, we say that we are Easter people, people of the resurrection, and we are, but we are also people that should be following our Shepherd. We need to be listening deeply for that voice of the Good Shepherd. We need to hear that voice, and we need to share that voice with the world.

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Hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd can be different for all of us, but I can tell you that it starts here gathered together in community. I can tell you that it involves being familiar and close with our scriptures, and I can tell you that it means being engaged and a part of the community in which we live. Then, just as Jesus gathered with the lost and the forlorn and the broken, we can again see and hear God in those around us. The voice that leads us in righteous paths and leads us through the darkest valleys, the voice of the one that never leaves us, a shepherd, a shepherd that is willing to lay down their life and wants us to do the same. As resurrection people we are called to be changed people, to see the world differently, to move in the world differently, to steadfastly share the voice of our shepherd. And in our moments of loneliness, isolation, and hopelessness, the Good Shepherd responds to those deepest yearnings by offering an alternative to that fear and separation and insecurity. The Good Shepherd provides us a home and an identity and protection even when we know we will be walking in the darkest valleys. That's what it means to be resurrection people.

You may be familiar with my green stole that I wear. Sometimes at Idlewild it's hard to see because this pulpit covers up most of our bodies, so I brought it with me as a demonstration. This is my green stole. And for those of you very far away there in the back, on the right side of it it says Practice Resurrection. Now Bobbie Frances McDonald, a member of my church in Lawrence, Kansas, handmade this for me after I preached an Eastertide sermon in which I quoted a Wendel Berry poem of which Practice Resurrection is the final line. She made this in 2012 for me. She made it for me because that Practice Resurrection became a theme of how we understood ourselves at First Presbyterian Church, Lawrence; and I'd like to share a portion of that poem, The Mad Farmer poem by Wendel Berry, for you today.

So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant and that you will not live to harvest. Practice Resurrection.

Friends, it is my deepest hope for us that as we listen and hear the call of the Good Shepherd in our lives, we can practice resurrection this day and every day. Amen.