

**Psalm 23**  
**Gospel Reading *John 10:1-10***

**word count: 1,632**

The 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm brings reassurance and confidence to people who reach out for it in times of need. Its words are poetry and its images invoke a relationship between shepherd and sheep, leader and citizen, God and humankind. It reveals the essence of the trust we are willing to give in this relationship, and the comfort we receive in this trust.

The psalm is read on the third Sunday after Easter, called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” It is read alongside the passage from John, which is quite different. Although similar in the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep, this is a harsh and vitriolic polemic against leaders, religious leaders in particular, who follow their own agendas and do not look after the welfare of their flocks.

This passage follows the story of a blind man who comes to faith and hope, and is kicked out of the synagogue because he will not reveal the name of the one who healed him on the Sabbath. The blind man sees, says John, even as religious leaders who are called to see, become increasingly blind to the presence of God.

In other words, John aims this text at shepherds called to lead people in paths of love, justice and peace, and instead directs them 180 degrees on the wrong path. John says to these religious leaders, “You are the ones who are blind; you are the ones.” Later in the passage, he says, “You are the ones who are wolves; the ones who break in over the wall seeking to devour the sheep; the ones who have been given responsibility as shepherds, but instead abandon the sheep.”

There is a crisis of leadership in the world today, and we are feeling the effects.

One crisis begins with the church, where it extends beyond the preying (with an “e”) televangelists and religious hucksters, and even beyond the ongoing clergy abuse scandals in the Catholic church; this week the news revealed the possible endangerment of 400 children in a fundamentalist Mormon compound, and opens the question of where religion and the abuse of power intersect in places about which we may be still be unaware.

Two different priests, with whom I shared a cordial friendship over years of interfaith work, were suddenly removed from their parishes a few years ago, without the chance to say, “Good-bye.” The tragedy of it all becomes more complicated when you can attach a familiar, friendly face to someone who may have abused power within a system that was aware but said nothing.

We don’t like to talk about these things, but talk about them we must. People, who come to our church, or any church for that matter, must be able to expect that they will find a welcoming, but also a safe atmosphere. In everything we do, there must be transparency, and in how we model what we believe, there must be a sense of integrity. Trust is foundational to the church.

In our conference of the United Church of Christ, it is mandatory for all clergy to take a boundary-training course every few years. Mine is coming up again, and I will make sure my obligation to understand new information on this topic is achieved.

We take great care to be transparent in all of our lay-leadership work. Our documents are on our web-site for anyone to see. We are careful as a staff to avoid impropriety. Doors are left open, and I work in front of a large window where I may be seen when anyone is in my office.

In the United Church of Christ system of governance, you have the opportunity to raise issues that trouble you. If you do not achieve satisfaction within your local church, you are invited to bring your concerns to the association, and a Church and Ministry Committee made up of both clergy and laity, both male and female, will listen to both sides and try to find a resolution.

It is a human system, and when it works it is gratifying and uplifting. When it fails, as I'm sure some can attest to, the result sits there, satisfying no-one.

And so, John aims his poison pen against leaders who follow their own agendas and do not look after the welfare of their flocks.

John calls those leaders blind to the truth: wolves, frauds and fakes. They reject the works and teachings of the very one they claim to hold dearest to their hearts. They poison the sheep. They lead the sheep over the cliff. They claim to see, but they don't. They claim to lead, and protect, and feed, and care for the sheep, but they instead cannibalize, scatter, eviscerate the flock.

We have a crisis today. It should be inconceivable to every man, woman and child that torture as a means of interrogation should not be on the table for discussion in any civilized country—ever. A video clip on the news this week of a prisoner being water boarded sent a message around the world; a message that should hit us between the eyes, that the soul of everything we hold dear about who we are as a nation is in danger of being irretrievably lost.

An article in the March 24 New Yorker tells the story of Abu Ghraib from the perspective of the photographer. It is a story about a lack of planning and leadership that caused a situation to descend into confusion without rules; torturing, demeaning, humiliating, degrading and even killing detainees. It shames our soldiers and it shames us.

It lays bare before the world an end-product that cannot be born from any teachings of Jesus; not born-again Christian, but born-again Caligula.

Certainly, as Christians we have a right to expect more from our leadership, when they so ardently remind us of what it means to be a follower of Jesus in this place and at this time in our history.

We come to church expecting a safe and welcoming atmosphere with full disclosure. We should expect the same from our schools, our work, institutions, and our government. We need to know that there is good reason to place our trust. And in many places and cases, we find that at this particular time there is confusion, separation, alienation, worry and anger.

Today more than ever we need to experience, not just hear, the feeling expressed by the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm—a sense that there is some presence that can bring reassurance and confidence to people who reach out for it in times of need. Its words are poetry and its images invoke a right relationship between shepherd and sheep, leader and citizen, God and humankind. It reveals the essence of the trust we are willing to give in this relationship, and the comfort we receive in this trust. It is a sacred trust and cannot be abused.

And so, the only people who can turn things around 180 degrees are people like you—people who understand the importance of maintaining a sense of integrity and honor in the face of adversity, people who want to love God, their neighbor, and love their country back into wholeness. It's your country to take back. It's your faith to take back. It's your future and your children's future to take back.

Who are the shepherds? You are. I am. We are a people that see our vision through the lens of our own faith communities.

But it is not up to churches alone to act as shepherd to the lost. Your own individual journey—your own way of walking through life and acting and reacting within it is where some of the strongest testimonies of faith in action will occur. The church is you.

There is a story by a man named Tom Lacey that pokes fun at every denomination, about an ecumenical crusade that was being held in a large city. Every imaginable church group was in attendance for this event. One afternoon the gathering was in session when all of a sudden a lay-person rushed in shouting, "The building's on fire! The building's on fire!" Confusion reigned as each church group came together and did what came naturally:

The Lutherans nailed a notice on the door declaring that the fire was evil.

The Methodists gathered in the corner to pray, and to examine the issue of fire. Then they had a huge church fight over it, and issued a statement about fire that made *everyone* unhappy.

The Baptists cried, "Where's our water?" assuming that they were ones who would be saved.

The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessings that fire brings.

The Congregationalists, relying on their defining sense of individual freedom, shouted "Everyone for themselves."

The Unitarians reasoned that the fire would burn itself out if just given the chance, and started a vigil condemning the oppression of fire, at which they read scriptures from all traditions but their own.

The Roman Catholics passed a plate to cover the damages and cover up the fire.

The Fundamentalists proclaimed that the fire was the vengeance of God, who is reportedly still quite angry over certain domestic partnership policies of Disney and United Airlines.

The Episcopalians formed a perfect procession and marched out in 4/4 time, and they did it *beautifully*.

The Christian Scientists concluded that there was no *real* fire, so water was not necessary, nor should it be allowed.

The Presbyterians appointed a chairperson to appoint a committee to look into the matter and make a written report.

And the lay-person in the back grabbed a fire extinguisher and put the fire out.

Shepherds: Grab something and put out the fire. Demand better. Expect more. Help to make it happen. And, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life."

### Scripture for Sunday, April 13, 2008

#### Psalm 23 (King James Version) In Unison

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

#### John 10:1-10 (NRSV)

1 "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. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.