

Sermon 4.17.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:36-43 | **Psalm 23** | Revelation 7:9-17 | **John 10:-18**

A Lutheran church decided to call their first female pastor. The congregation was excited, though a few people were a little nervous and fearful. This was a big step for their church, and they had high expectations.

There were two brothers in the church (who had been there for decades), and it was their tradition to always invite a new pastor to go fishing with them. It was a great way to spend time with the new pastor, get to know them a little bit, and make them feel welcome. Now the brothers were pretty sure that they didn't know any female pastors who liked to go fishing, but they decided they should probably invite her anyway, just in case she found out that they had done it for every single pastor except her.

So the brothers set aside their expectations and asked their new pastor if she'd like to go fishing with them. And to their surprise, she told them that she would love to, that in fact she used to fish with her dad all the time, and it was one of her favorite hobbies.

When the day arrived, all three of them set out in the boat. The new pastor had come prepared with lunch and good fishing gear, and the brothers were surprised how skilled she was at fishing. She didn't speak loudly and scare the fish away. She handled her reel well, baited her own hooks, and within a few hours, she had landed some impressive fish – more impressive, in fact, than the fish the brothers caught.

After lunch it started to get cloudy, and the breeze picked up. The pastor asked the brothers if it would be okay for her to get a jacket from the car. They said, "Sure!" and went to

start the motor so they could head into shore. But the pastor stopped them and said, “You know what? This is such a great spot, and I’d hate for us to lose it, so just stay here and keep fishing.” And instead she got out of the boat, stepped onto the lake, and walked across the water towards her car.

And with a deep, deep sigh, one brother turned to the other and said, “I knew it. I knew it! We call our first female pastor, and she doesn’t even know how to swim.”

Expectations are a funny thing. They determine how we see and experience the world. Our expectations can cause us to feel disappointed or angry, affirmed or thankful. Sometimes we have unrealistic expectations. And often, when our expectations aren’t met, we’re unable to see the good that’s happening around us, and we become closed off from experiencing how God might be at work *outside of our* expectations.

So why am I talking about expectations this morning? It’s because Jesus made some big, bold claims in today’s Gospel reading. Every year on the third Sunday after Easter we read the words of Psalm 23, which begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” And right alongside, we read the words Jesus spoke in John 10, where he said, “I am the good shepherd.”

That was a big claim for Jesus to make. For centuries, Old Testament prophets had described the leaders of Israel as *shepherds* of God’s people. Some of these leaders were good shepherds, but most of them were bad. The prophet Ezekiel criticized leaders who were supposed to shepherd God’s people, but who only cared about themselves. He called them out, saying, “you have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered.” (Ezekiel 34:4-5a)

Instead of caring for God's people like a good shepherd is supposed to, many of the leaders of Israel hurt and divided and oppressed their flock. And in response, God declared that he would send a *good* shepherd. He said, "I will set over them one shepherd...and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. (Ezekiel 34:23)

In our reading this morning, Jesus reveals that *he* is that good shepherd. The one sent from God, to care for all people, to lead all people, to gather all people into one flock defined and united by God's mercy and love.

And here's my question for you this morning: what are *your* expectations of a good shepherd? What do *you* expect a good shepherd to do and be in your life?

Because your expectations matter.

And it's important to understand what Jesus meant (and didn't mean!) when he said that he is the good shepherd.

For some people, these verses create expectations that Jesus will be some sort of genie that grants all our wishes in life. I know it sounds funny to say out loud, but all of us think this way at least a little bit. Today it's popular to believe that following Jesus means that your life will be free of struggle, loss, confusion, and pain. And if you turn on the TV almost any time day or night, you can find someone proclaiming what has become known as the *prosperity gospel*. The prosperity gospel teaches that if we follow Jesus faithfully enough and believe hard enough and *give* enough, then God will bless us with material wealth, physical health, and our lives will be filled only with good, wonderful things.

People who believe this often point to the words we heard Jesus speak this morning. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,"

and many have interpreted these words to mean that following Jesus guarantees getting the life you want, or at least the life the world says you want.

But you see the inevitable issue with the prosperity gospel, right? If following Jesus means material wealth and health, then what does it mean when we get sick, and find out we have cancer? What does it mean when we *don't* become financially rich and instead have money problems? What does it mean when tragedy hits, when bad things happen, when the husband leaves, when the teenager rebels, the job disappears, when the loved one dies?

This is where our expectations matter. Because if we expect that being a *good shepherd* means that Jesus will be like a genie, then inevitably we end up feeling one of two ways:

- We either feel guilty, because we believe that our problems and struggles and challenges occur because we don't have enough faith. And so we try to believe harder and do more and be better and make ourselves more holy so that God will grant our wishes, until faith isn't about trusting God, but about trying to make God do what we want.
- Or we end up feeling disappointed. We think, "I've been such a good person, I've done *this*, and given *that*, and prayed *so much*, and tried *so hard*, and God isn't doing what I'm asking him to, so forget it." We become angry, and we reject the idea that God is *good* or loving, or maybe even that God exists at all.

Our expectations matter. Jesus never promised that as his followers our lives would be easy or free of struggle or devoid of pain. He never said that being a *good shepherd* means he'll grant our every wish. Sheep don't get to tell the shepherd what to do, they can only follow because they trust that their shepherd is leading them somewhere good, that he knows best and has their best interest at heart. I don't know why we experience evil and pain in life like we do. Sometimes we cause our own problems, but other times they're outside of our control, and we don't know why. But that *doesn't* mean that God isn't *good*, or that Jesus can't be trusted.

Even when God is our shepherd, we will *still* walk through dark valleys of evil and struggle and pain. (Psalm 23:4) Even when we're following Jesus, we will still have enemies and hardship in life, and in fact following God will often force us to face hardships and confront fear and be uncomfortable. If we search through our Gospel reading today, we will see that Jesus does *not* promise us wealth, health, ease, or comfort in life.

But he does promise us something more precious and more valuable:

1. He promises that through him, we will be saved and forgiven.
2. He promises that in him, even in the darkest times of our lives, we will find rest and comfort.
3. He promises to lay down his life for us.
4. And he promises that through him we will have abundant life.

These are promises we can cling to. These are expectations we can have of our shepherd that will never disappoint. This is what it means for Jesus to be *our* good shepherd. It means that in the midst of all the junk of life, all the ups and downs, victories and defeats, struggles and heartaches, confusion and loss, the mistakes and the pain, that there is hope, that Jesus is still at work, caring for us, forgiving us, loving us, leading us – and because of this, our life has a peace and abundance that is deeper and stronger than anything or anyone else.

The abundant life that Jesus promises to us has nothing to do with wealth and material things. That's the way the world thinks, believing that money and power and possessions and prestige lead to the most fulfilling life. But this is not the way that God thinks.

Back in the 1960s, there was a couple named Millard and Linda Fuller. As a young man, Millard was a livestock trader, and made enough money to put himself through law school. By

the age of 29 he was a self-made millionaire. The couple was rich beyond their wildest expectations, and purchased everything money could buy. It was the fulfillment of the so-called 'American Dream,' and everything seemed perfect, until one day Linda told Millard she no longer loved him. She said they "were miserable and were about to get divorced."¹ The couple decided to stick it out and work through their issues, and they came to realize that their possessions and wealth were a key part of their problems. And so turning to Jesus for help, they decided to give away *everything*. They became missionaries in Africa. Life began to have real meaning. Their marriage improved. They were finding abundance. In 1976, they founded Habitat for Humanity, and to this day they have built more than 800,000 homes and provided housing for more than 6.8 million people in need.² And in an interview he gave in 1993, Millard said, "When we look at our lives now, we consider ourselves richer than we have ever been."

God is the author of all life, and he knows what leads to truly fulfilling, abundant, rich, satisfying life. Abundant life is experiencing God's forgiveness, grace, and love. It's extending that forgiveness and grace to others. It's living with meaningful relationships and being part of a community. It's knowing peace and hope in the midst of life's storms. It's laying down our lives to serve others in love.

That is abundant life. *That* is what Jesus promises. *That* is where our shepherd is leading. Trust him, and follow. Amen.

¹ Source: http://articles.courant.com/1993-04-29/news/0000102740_1_habitat-volunteers-linda-fuller-jesus.

² Source: http://www.habitat.org/celebrate_build/perspective.aspx.