

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 7, 2017
Year A / Psalm 23
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Dorota Pruski

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, our readings include the 23rd Psalm and an excerpt from Jesus' Good Shepherd discourse in John's gospel. We often refer to this Sunday as Good Shepherd Sunday.

That title, "The Good Shepherd," conjures up for me the images that decorated my Sunday school classrooms growing up—pictures of Jesus smiling warmly at a little lamb in his arms, or Jesus with a lamb over his shoulders and a shepherd's crook in one hand. Years later I would refer to these images, perhaps a little irreverently, as Jesus' senior pictures. They all looked so impeccably lit, so peaceful, so comforting.

Except for the fact that Jesus didn't have blonde, beautifully coiffed hair, the image of a sweet, smiling Jesus and a happy, clean, little lamb is perfectly appropriate for a Sunday school classroom. It is good that our children's early introductions to Jesus suggest that he is gentle and protective. That Jesus cares for us is a good message to hear at any age.

As we get older, however, our experience of Jesus gets more complicated. At some point or at several points in our lives we encounter a situation that brings us up short. Something interrupts the soft, warm glow that surrounded our Sunday school image of Jesus. Something casts a shadow over the scene, and we come to realize that danger lurks in the field. What's more, we come to realize that our shepherd's crook is not like a magician's wand – it cannot make all the bad things disappear.

We thought we were being protected by divine armor, but suddenly this armor looks more like soft, vulnerable skin. Those threatening shadows in the field begin to attack. We call them things like loneliness, depression, addiction, disease, natural disaster, heartbreak, death. They hurt us and they hurt our fellow sheep. And inevitably, we will have to ask the question, "Why isn't our Good Shepherd keeping us safe from harm?"

Putting the question a little differently, where is God when bad things happen?

We may ask this question in any number of ways and for any number of reasons. We may wonder why God isn't curing cancer and ending racism and putting an end to poverty and eradicating homelessness. We may ask why God isn't healing our illnesses or saving our loved ones from dying or reversing climate change. When bad things happen, where can we find that protective, glowing Shepherd?

Theologians have been pondering such questions for centuries. They even gave their solutions a fancy name: theodicy, a word that refers to justifying God's ways in the face of evil. At the core of theodicy is a contradiction between three premises: God is all-powerful, God is benevolent, and there is evil in the world. Logically, at least one of these premises must not be true.

Some theologians have argued that the first premise is not true. God must not be all-powerful because if a benevolent God had the power to end suffering, that God would end it. Since there is evil in the world, our good and loving God must not be all-powerful.

Others have argued that the second premise is not true. God must not be benevolent because although God could eradicate evil in the world (being all-powerful), God does not and thus God is not good.

Still other theologians deny the third premise and say that there is no evil. They argue that "evil" is merely a matter of perspective because what's bad for the gazelle is great for the lion.

Finally there are those theologians who would say that we do not and cannot have an answer to the problem of evil. God is all-powerful. And God is benevolent. And evil exists. Beyond that, they say we cannot really know God's ways. Personally I think this last argument is a bit of cop-out, even though I suspect God likes the paradox of those three premises together.

The simplest definition of a theologian is someone who talks about God. Thus all of us who think and talk about the nature of God are theologians, even if we have not published famous papers on topics like theodicy. So I encourage you to consider your own answers for how God operates in the midst of suffering.

My answer takes me back to the image of the Good Shepherd, the one where Jesus has a lamb draped over his shoulders and shepherd's crook in one hand. I would make a few adjustments to the version that hung in my Sunday school classroom though. Obviously I'd like to see Jesus depicted as a first-century Palestinian, but more importantly I'd change two things.

First, I'd remove the sunny, bucolic backdrop of the original because I'm not sure we need more help trusting that God is with us when everything is going well. Instead, I'd place the Good Shepherd in the valley of the shadow of death from Psalm 23. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me." This change might make the Good Shepherd image a less popular choice for decorating kids' classrooms, but all of us could use the reminder that God will go anywhere to find any sheep that is lost or in need of help.

The prominent rabbi Harold Kushner observes that people who have been hurt by life get stuck in the "valley of the shadow," and they don't know how to find their way out. Rabbi Kushner says that's the role of God – to find people when they are living in darkness, take them by the hand, and show them how to find their way into the sunlight again.

The second change I'd make to the Good Shepherd image is that I'd make sure that the shepherd's hand, the one hold the staff, clearly shows the wound that Thomas so desperately wanted to touch. With a wounded body, and holding a simple shepherd's crook, that's how I

think God shows up when bad things happen, with no weapons of war, and no impenetrable armor. Like the rest of us, God bears the wounds of suffering and pain. This Shepherd of ours has loved us to death—has loved us *through* death, even. And this shepherd, who understands grief and sorrow, continues to walk beside us not only in green pastures and beside still waters, but also through dark, troubled valleys.

With this image of the Good Shepherd in mind, my fellow theologians, we return to our three premises. I readily acknowledge that evil exists. Bad things happen to us and to our sister and brother sheep. Also, God is supremely benevolent, the very definition of goodness and love. I might add that God's goodness and love are God's gift to all sheep, not just to the ones who recognize Jesus as their shepherd. And as for God's power, I suppose that's the premise we're left to drop, right? With wounded hands and feet, our shepherd cannot stop bad things from happening.

But I think back to the kind of messiah the people of Israel were waiting for—one who would violently overthrow the occupying imperial authorities and establish a new political kingdom. What they got instead was a man who preached forgiveness and mercy, and who said that greatness comes by serving and loving others. I wonder sometimes if we continue to misunderstand what God's power looks like in the world.

God's power does not dominate or conquer; rather, it persists. Stubbornly. Through death, and life, and angels, and rulers, and things present, and things to come, and powers, and height, and depth, and everything else in all creation, God's powerful love remains with us.

God does not make bad things disappear, but God is with us in our pain, summoning us to live courageously and hopefully. In my mind, this makes our shepherd very Good.