

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourth Sunday of Easter: April 25, 2021

“Santa Claus or the Shepherd”

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Good morning and welcome again to another Eastertide Sunday. What beautiful and comforting readings we have today about the Lord being our shepherd and Jesus declaring he is the Good Shepherd. And as is often the case, our Old Testament reading is the premonition of what is to come, with Jesus as the fulfillment in our hearing of those ancient promises.

My question to those of you who probably know Psalm 23 like the back of your hand, is the Lord your shepherd? I am not asking this in a frivolous way. Most people I meet, when I really ask about their prayer life, seem to think the Lord is Santa Claus.

I don't state this lightly, and not to judge but to inspire. I repeat the question, is Jesus your shepherd? A lot of the people I meet still have a very young faith, no matter what their age, and I hear things like: I asked God for a new job, but he didn't answer. I have asked God for healing, but I am still sick, and of course the list goes on to include everything from having a good day to winning the lottery.

This is God as Santa Claus, not as the shepherd of our lives. When David wrote this psalm, he had already experienced a close relationship with God, and although he is one of the most beloved of the Jewish leaders, a song maker and mighty king, honored in both Jewish and Christian traditions, we all know his life was not easy and he was in no way perfect. Yet he states “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not be in want.”

So what is the difference between God as Santa Claus and God as my shepherd? Don't they both seem like statements that fulfill our desires? Not exactly. We all know the idea of Santa Claus as one who presents you with gifts when you are good. This is not a

shepherd. Santa Claus has become, not the Saint providing for the poor, but rather a mythical jolly fellow who, if you are good, will fulfill your wish list. But this is not the purpose or desire of God. God prefers to be our shepherd.

Let's look at the shepherd. First and foremost, he could be described as the Sherpa, the guide through rocky terrain. Someone who knows the territory like the back of his hand, and a leader who will coach you through. Shepherds do not change the terrain, smooth out the rocky road, or patch things up so the experience is easy. They don't choose one sheep over another and are always looking out for those who are weak, who stray, the young and the old.

Shepherds lead, guide and companion their flock through the rocky terrain. The shepherd in the midst of struggle leads the flock to the relief of water and pasture. However no one gets to stay there, as the flock is an ever-moving group destined to higher pastures during summer seasons, and traveling back down to lower safer places in the winter. Constantly moving with a changing environment, yet safe within the shepherd's care.

While although the going may get rough, there are breaks, breathers, and refreshers, that help the flock keep going. If there is a predator, the shepherd confronts it. Getting you to those places of relief and safety is the job of the shepherd. This is not Santa Claus bringing a gift or defining if you are good or not, but rather a guide bringing you to a safe space without judgment, so that you may carry on.

Life happens, life is hard, times get tough, but if we take a moment, take a breath and allow God to guide us, we may find the friend who listens to us, or the opportunity that opens up to us a place that can provide the nourishment we need to improve our lives in various forms. This is the green pasture. We may only have a moment in the midst of our struggles, but when we look up at the stars in amazement, or walk along absorbed by the world around us, trees, beaches, even the sound that cars make as they bump along the

road in a kind of rhythm, these are the still waters of relief. Not an unwarranted Christmas gift, but a lifelong availability to take a moment to let go.

And if we find those moments of solace in the creation around us, and if we listen closely as God speaks to our hearts, we will be led to paths of righteousness. I have yet to have that happen from a Santa Claus at a mall.

Those paths of righteousness may bring their own rough terrain, but again, I know there is always support, and a relief available by turning my thoughts to God. For God, the advancement of your soul, your ability to love and love greatly, to have compassion, to participate in a beloved community is the ultimate desire for His flock. These gifts of the spirit are developed, earned and created sometimes by the most difficult of journeys.

And we know God is with us on this journey. Christ himself has suffered and conquered death - one of our biggest human fears. God's staff and rod will guide us and keep us on the path. He will offer us occasional respite and comfort, but He will continue to lead us forward into our very last day if we let him. The idea of God as Santa Claus, is not a theology of growth, nor of comfort, as we may find our demanding prayers denied over and over again because in God's plan, the answers to your prayers may come from the unexpected in our lives or even through the very struggles we would like to **not** experience.

If we have the courage to follow the shepherd, if we do in fact recognize his voice, he will set us a table with those who trouble us. This does not sound comforting, but it is in a way showing those enemies that we are led by a God of love, forgiveness, and compassion. He will give us the strength to sit at table with those who are not like us, and still give us a sense of peace.

If we chose to let go of telling God exactly how he should be with us, as children often give their want list to Santa, and allow God to love us just the way we are, He will anoint

us with overflowing love. A love that can bring us through even the worst of times. Guide us to refreshment, even if only for a moment, so we may carry on.

In our Gospel, Jesus explains that there are also other flocks, and God will also bring them into the fold, so great is his love. He warns there are those who will look at his flock only for self gain. They will try to divide and conquer, they make Santa Claus-like promises that they **cannot** keep. These are the hired hands, sometimes even the wolves with their agenda being self-centered, and self satisfying. Quick to dive in, get what they want, and then quickly leave.

Jesus not only states, but, as we know, actually did die for us. Laid down his life for us. Showed us there is more to God's promises than a Santa Claus quick fix. Jesus does not leave us for the next best thing, he does not come around once a year, but is always guiding, always leading.

Through his Passion, he leads us through the real life experience of betrayal, denial, innocence accused of guilt. He takes on the beatings, he doesn't lie or try to con his way out of the trials that come before him. Ultimately he gives his life, and then shows us there is still more. There is afterlife. Even at death, he does not abandon us, but waits patiently for us to join him, in a place where there is no sorrow or pain.

We may resurrect Santa Claus once a year, but Jesus resurrects our souls every day and is there for us every time we seek him. Next time you think of this psalm and utter the words, "The Lord is my shepherd I will not want", remember this is not about wanting gifts from a once-a-year God. But rather a covenant to see you through whatever is in your path on your way to enlightenment and eventually to seeing God face to face. The Lord is our shepherd, and we have worth. Jesus is not the hired hand, but rather the guide that through his own death, has given us new life. Christ has risen, Christ has risen indeed.

Alleluia and Amen.