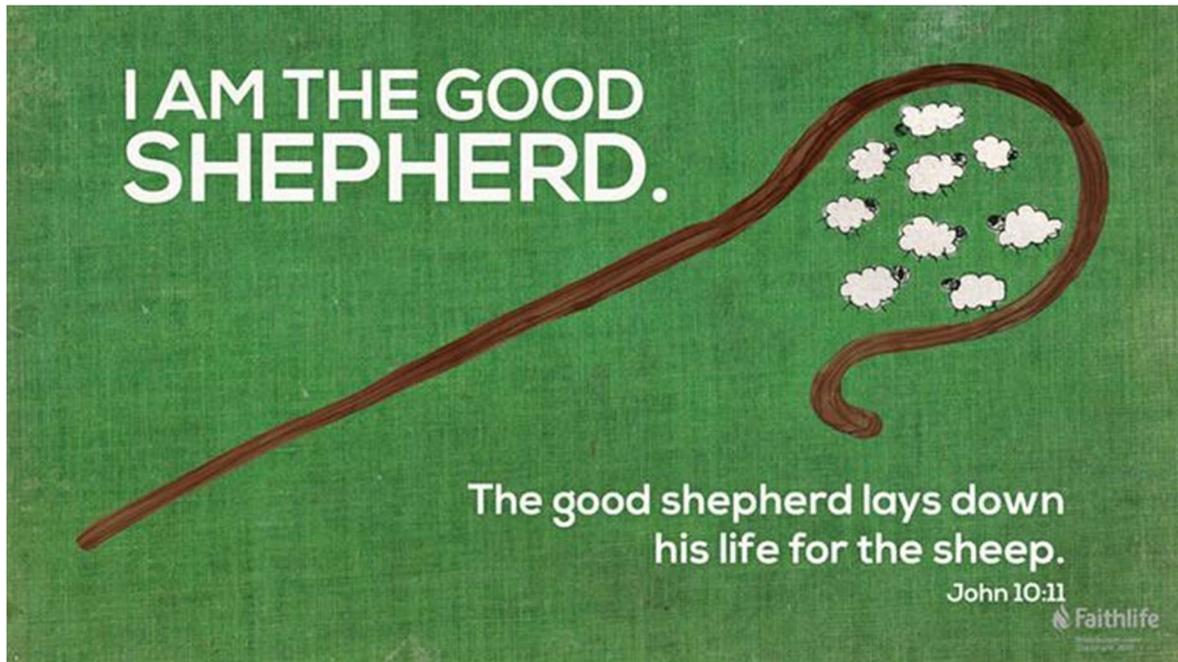


FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
WILLMAR, MN  
April 25, 2021 - 4th Sunday of Easter



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\*Please rise as you are able  
Please join in speaking/singing **bolded** text

**PRELUDE**

**WELCOME TO WORSHIP**

**PREPARING OUR HEARTS**

**\*Opening Words**

The Lord Jesus Christ is our shepherd.  
**He lays down his life for his sheep.**  
The Lord Jesus Christ is our shepherd.  
**He knows us and we belong to him.**  
The Lord Jesus Christ is our Shepherd.  
**He speaks and we listen for his voice.**

**\*Opening Hymn #187 (GG)**

**“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”**

Text: Thrupp’s Hymns for the Young, 1836 / Music: William Batchelder Bradbury, 1859  
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Savior, like a shepherd lead us; much we need your tender care.  
In your pleasant pastures feed us; for our use your fold prepare.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, you have bought us: we are yours.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, you have bought us: we are yours.

We are yours: in love befriend us; be the guardian of our way.  
Keep your flock: from sin defend us; seek us when we go astray.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, hear your children when we pray.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, hear your children when we pray.

You have promised to receive us, poor and sinful though we be;  
you have mercy to relieve us, grace to cleanse, and power to free.

Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, early let us turn to you.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, early let us turn to you.

Early let us seek your favor; early let us do your will.  
Blessed Lord and only Savior, with your love our spirits fill.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, you have loved us; love us still.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, you have loved us; love us still.

### **Prayer of Confession**

If we are honest with ourselves, our hearts condemn us.  
But God, who knows everything, is greater than our hearts;  
and God's deep desire for us is mercy, love, and peace.  
Therefore let us confess our sin.

**Lord, have mercy on us.**  
**We talk about love, but our actions betray us.**  
**We talk about love, but we neglect the poor.**  
**talk about love, but we fail to love one another.**  
**Lord, have mercy on us.**  
**Forgive us, and abide in us by the power of your Spirit**  
**so that our lives may show our love for Jesus Christ,**  
**in whose body we live and in whose name we pray. Amen.**

We seek God's grace with boldness because we trust in Jesus Christ,  
the one who loves us and laid down his life for us.  
This is the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.  
**Thanks be to God.**

**Hymn #418 (GG)**

**“Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling”**

Text and Music by Will L. Thompson, 1880

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Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me.  
See on the portals he’s waiting and watching, watching for you and for me.  
“Come home, come home! You who are weary, come home.”  
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, “O sinner, come home!”

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading, pleading for you and for me?  
Why should we linger and heed not his mercies, mercies for you and for me?  
“Come home, come home! You who are weary, come home.”  
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, “O sinner, come home!”

O for the wonderful love he has promised, promised for you and for me!  
Though we have sinned, he has mercy and pardon, pardon for you and for me.  
“Come home, come home! You who are weary, come home.”  
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, “O sinner, come home!”

**THE WORD PROCLAIMED**

**Children’s Message**

**Prayer Response #469 (GG)**

**“Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying”**

Words & Music by Ken Medema

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Lord, listen to your children praying, Lord, send your Spirit in this place;  
Lord, listen to your children praying, send us love, send us power, send us grace.  
(repeat)

**Scripture Lesson**

**Message**

**“Part of the Fold”**

**Rev. Leanne B. Thompson**

**April 25, 2021 - 4th Sunday in Easter**

If you happen to follow our church facebook page, you may have seen the video that Pastor Scott posted this week. If you haven’t seen it, allow me to describe it for you. There is a gravel road, more of a path really, and along that road a deep, narrow trench has been dug to lay some type of pipe. But that isn’t what you notice

initially. What you notice is that a sheep has gotten itself stuck in that deep narrow trench, good and thoroughly buried, and a young man is working to free it. There is a sense of elation as the trapped sheep is finally pulled free. It goes leaping, and bounding - rejoicing we might even say - only to almost immediately bound right back into the trench only about 20 feet from where it was originally trapped. I admit I laughed out loud watching it --- every time I watched it. I watched it repeatedly. Oh, but friends. It was more than a good laugh. It was also a humbling reflection. The video was posted with this explanation: "When Jesus left the 99 to rescue the 1, and the 1 was me." I believe the description Scott supplied when he shared the video was "poor daft sheep." And it was, indeed, a foolish creature.

Our scripture lesson today is one of the most beloved images of Jesus. It has been celebrated in song and in works of art. It is the image often quoted in the familiar 23rd Psalm. And it was the image of Jesus that hung prominently in the church sanctuary of my childhood - Jesus tenderly caring for and guiding the sheep. And as we explore this image of Jesus today, tell this familiar story and grow in understanding of what it means that Jesus is *The Good Shepherd*, we must first understand and acknowledge that we are sheep. We are, indeed, poor daft creatures more often than we would like to admit.

We are inclined to wander off. We get ourselves mired in all kinds of trenches and brambles. We tend to repeat our mistakes. So, how is being a sheep working for you? As you ponder the image of the sheep being freed from the trench only to fall right back in, are there images in your own life that come to mind? How have you been led astray or wandered off? In what ways have you done things you know are bad for you, and kept right on doing them? Where have you gotten stuck, emotionally, spiritually, or physically, and couldn't free yourself?

Let's be honest, it is just a little bit offensive to be compared to sheep. We would like to think that we are more savvy than that, that we are smart enough to warrant some autonomy in our lives, that we can handle things on our own. But there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. So, let's just own that shall we? Let's acknowledge that we are more foolish than we would like to admit. Because if we can understand that about ourselves, it makes understanding Jesus as *The Good Shepherd* that much more meaningful.

The heart of this image is about comfort and protection. We gravitate to this understanding of Jesus because it reminds us that we are cared for, we are provided for, we are nurtured, we are protected. It offers us a safe sheltering place to lean in, and rest, and be held. It shows us that there is a place to belong and be loved within the safe shelter of the shepherd's fold. It is a tremendous source of comfort to know that we are part of the flock, and the shepherd's loving care extends to us. It is profoundly meaningful that the shepherd's loving care does not depend on us

being worthy of that love; it does not depend on us earning that love. Jesus knows the nature of sheep and chooses to love and shepherd us anyway.

It is the nature of sheep to be daft fools; it is the nature of Jesus, the good shepherd, to love us relentlessly. The shepherd's love is unconditional; his patience is inexhaustible. It does not matter how many times you wander off and get lost, or how many times you end up in the trench; he will seek you, and find you, and pull you out again. That is good news!

But sheep, dear beloved sheep. Be aware that today's scripture lesson is not just a message of comfort. There is some warning here as well. It is the nature of sheep to be daft fools. But it is also the nature of sheep to think that we are smarter than we are and have more authority than we do.

We belong to the flock, and it is a gift of grace that we are part of the fold. We aren't included because we are worthy and we can't earn our place here. We are here because the shepherd invited us. And the truth that is often difficult to accept is that the shepherd can invite whomever he pleases into the fold. We don't get to decide who belongs. Oh, but we try to claim that authority, don't we? We set artificial criteria for who can be included and attempt to hold other sheep accountable to standards imposed by us, not by the shepherd. I don't feel I need to belabor this point. I'm sure we are all aware of ways the church and society have historically found reasons to exclude and marginalize those who were longing to belong and be loved. The church is guilty, more than we care to admit, of practicing conditional love and exhaustible patience that are not modeled by our shepherd.

So, here's the warning. We need to remember we are sheep. We are daft fools in need of guidance, in need of a shepherd's love. And the shepherd is going to love us. But the shepherd is going to love other sheep, too. Listen again to this little phrase that shows up in today's lesson: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." There is one shepherd, and it's not us. There are other flocks; we are not the only one Jesus loves.

The shepherd is loving us, caring for us, seeking us when we are lost, trying to draw all of his beloved sheep together into one fold, one flock. And we sure don't make it easy for him do we. We cause plenty of problems as individual sheep chasing off after our own flights of fancy. But oh, the problems we create for the shepherd when we cluster into our own little familiar, like-minded flocks, resisting the fellowship of the whole larger flock, refusing to associate with other sheep who think differently, worship differently, live differently than we do. What harm we cause when we resist welcoming the lost sheep into the fold - the ones that Jesus wants us to make room for in the fold. Jesus invites them into his unconditional

love and inexhaustible patience and we push them out to the edges, refusing to embrace them in community.

We people of faith have a tendency to fixate on our own salvation. We want assurance that God is going to keep his promise to us and not cast us away from his mercy. Even though it is already ours, even though God has demonstrated faithfulness to us over and over again, we live in fear that maybe there isn't going to be enough grace to go around, or that we aren't really good enough to earn that grace. It doesn't matter how often we are reminded that the grace of God is a free gift, we keep trying to put a price tag on it. And when we do that, we treat the shepherd's fold like a limited space that only the most worthy may occupy. Beloved sheep of the shepherd's fold, that is not our problem to solve. The shepherd will make the fold as deep and as wide as he chooses, and he will invite in whomever he chooses. We may be uncomfortable about the proximity to sheep that are different from us, but we will never be outside the comfort of the shepherd's loving care and acceptance. That is the comfort we should rest in; that is the comfort we should strive to extend to the other sheep with whom we share space in the fold.

In addition to the silly sheep getting itself stuck in the trench, there was another post I saw this week that gave me pause to think - a tweet that went viral. The author gave this statement about his faith. He wrote: I'm not a Christian because I want the reward of heaven. I'm not a Christian because I'm running from hell. I'm a Christian because the character of Jesus Christ is so compelling to me that I want to spend my life chasing it, embodying it, and sharing it." I think, friends, that this is a beautiful summary of what it means to be a sheep following the good shepherd. We are already in the fold. We are already saved by grace alone through faith alone. We don't have to strive to secure our salvation. It is our task, as sheep, to strive to follow after the shepherd as closely as we can.

By the grace of God, may we learn from the Good Shepherd. May we tune our hearing to listen for his voice and depend on his faithfulness. May we trust him to lead us down the paths that avoid trenches and brambles. May we lean into his loving embrace, and make room within the fold for all those that he invites into his care.

Alleluia! Amen.

## **WE RESPOND TO THE WORD**

### **Hymn of Affirmation #470 (GG) "There Is a Longing in Our Hearts"**

Text and Music by Anne Quigley

There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord, for you to reveal yourself to us.  
There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, our God.

For justice, for freedom, for mercy: hear our prayer.  
In sorrow, in grief: be near; hear our prayer, O God.  
There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord, for you to reveal yourself to us.  
There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, our God.

For wisdom, for courage, for comfort: hear our prayer.  
In weakness, in fear: be near; hear our prayer, O God.  
There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord, for you to reveal yourself to us.  
There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, our God.

For healing, for wholeness, for new life: hear our prayer.  
In sickness, in death: be near; hear our prayer, O God.  
There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord, for you to reveal yourself to us.  
There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, our God.

Lord save us, take pity, Light in our darkness.  
We call you; we wait: be near, hear our prayer, O God.  
There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord, for you to reveal yourself to us.  
There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, our God.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Lord God, Jesus said that he came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. We praise you and we thank you for his purpose in coming and we pray to you that we might indeed experience the fullness of the life that he has promised. Take from us, O Lord, all those things that get in the way of our relationship with you—our pride and self-certainty, our doubt and our fear, and all those things that come from our human nature that blind us to the wonders of your presence and the glory of what you are doing in our midst. Lord, hear our prayer...

Lord, you know very well how our traditions and our understandings can become instruments of judgment rather than tools of your grace. We pray today O God for all those who have been hurt by our [thoughtless] insistence that our particular way is the only right way. Touch the hearts of those who have turned away from you because we have caused your light within us to grow dim. Lord, hear our prayer...

Lord, we thank you for the refreshing wind of your Spirit—for how you breathe into us new life and new hope and lead us to new understandings. In you we find wholeness for both body and soul. We pray now, O God that this wholeness may

not only grow within us— but that it might enter into and transform the lives of those whom we name before you at this time (spoken aloud or in the silence of our hearts). ---PAUSE--- We lift them up, O Lord, and also we lift up those situations and those persons, in thanksgiving, and with prayers of intercession, that you have placed upon our hearts this day...

We pray all these things, O God, in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord and our Savior, our brother and our friend, who taught us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day, our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**

### **Invitation to the Offering**

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the goods of the world and sees a brother or sister in need, yet refuses to help? With love for God and neighbor, let us offer our lives to the Lord.

### **Offering Prayer**

Gracious God, we give you thanks that you have shown us the meaning of love through Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us. Show us how to share Christ's love by giving our lives for one another; to the glory of your holy name. AMne

## **WE LEAVE TO SERVE**

### **Closing Hymn #541 (GG)**

#### **“God Be with You Till We Meet Again”**

Text: Jeremiah Eames Rankin / Music: Ralph Vaughn Williams

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God be with you till we meet again; loving counsels guide, uphold you,  
with a shepherd's care enfold you: God be with you till we meet again.

God be with you till we meet again; unseen wings protecting hide you,  
daily manna still provide you: God be with you till we meet again.

God be with you till we meet again; when life's perils thick confound you,  
put unfailing arms around you: God be with you till we meet again.

God be with you till we meet again; keep love's banner floating o'er you;  
smite death's threatening wave before you: God be with you till we meet again.

### **Charge**

In the name of the good shepherd, love one another.  
May the goodness and mercy of God follow you all the days of your life,  
and, at life's end, may you dwell in the house of the Lord forever.  
Alleluia! Amen.

**Benediction**  
**“The Blessing”**

words and music by Chris Brown, Cody Carnes, Kari Jobe, and Steven Furtick  
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The Lord bless you and keep you,  
Make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.  
The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.  
(repeat)

Amen, amen, amen. Amen, amen, amen.

The Lord bless you and keep you,  
Make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.  
The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

**POSTLUDE**