

**Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Sunday, April 22, 2018  
Psalm 23, John 10:11-18  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Kara Wagner Sherer**

I usually have help getting from my house to the church and back on crutches, but if necessary I can do it by myself. And when I am on my own, I have no hesitation calling out to strangers walking by, "Are you in a hurry? Do you mind helping me?" And these strangers have all been kind and helpful. This week two middle-aged white ladies dressed in exercise clothes were walking by and were glad to help. One of them seemed particularly surprised and said as she left, "I guess we weren't going to push you down and run away!" I thought this was a rather surprising revelation. I don't know if she was revealing an imagined fantasy or perhaps she imagined this might happen if she asked a stranger for help.

My friends and family have all been helpful. So much so that sometimes I have to think of things for people to do to help out. And then there are some people who just seem to have an instinct for helping. Some of them have been on crutches before and know exactly what I need and what I can do myself.

These levels of helpfulness are present in the Gospel of John, in the image of Jesus as the **good** shepherd. The hired hand gets a bad rap. As I've said before, as a teacher who was paid to teacher children I did care for my students. But Jesus is talking about someone who merely does what he or she is paid to do and no more. Apparently in Britain there is a name for this; a "jobsworth" is someone who does the bare minimum to get paid, no more.<sup>1</sup>

But the good shepherd does much more; the sheep know his voice and he lays down his life for the sheep. What does it mean to know someone's voice? My phone "knows" my voice; but I don't trust it to help me. Hugh Colburn knew his tactical instructor's voice when he was in the air force. When several squadrons were on parade he had to know his instructor's voice or he wouldn't stay in formation. The sheep know a shepherd's voice because he is always with them. He sleeps in the pen, spends every hour with them; he doesn't go home at five pm and leave them to the wolves.

This comforting image reminds us of God's intimate, personal love for us. We know God's voice because God is always with us. The 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm is the most familiar, beloved and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Christian Century*, "Living by the Word: Easter 4b" by David Heim, March 23, 2018.

comforting psalm because it reminds us that God is always with us even in the darkest times. I could end the sermon here and we could feel good and comforted by this reassurance of God's love and care. But the reading goes on.

Jesus says the good shepherd is willing to give his life for the sheep. Jesus and other people in history have literally given their lives for others. This week I am thinking of Tammie Jo Schults, the Southwest airlines pilot who landed the plane that lost an engine mid-air. Did you hear her conversation with the control tower? She was so calm as she communicated what had happened and asked for help to do the emergency landing. She didn't try to doctor the injured passenger. She wasn't the one with engineering skill who blocked the hole in the plane. She is a pilot and she gave herself, her skill, her knowledge, to save the lives of the rest of the passengers and crew by doing what she does best, landing a plane.

After this promise of sacrifice Jesus says something else that almost seems awkwardly inserted, "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." This intimate, personal love of God is not just for me. God's love cannot become selfish because the direction of God's love is always outward. Living a Christian life means always going to the edges, listening to the stranger, the person who makes us uncomfortable, those on the margins. God's love is not about me and you, or us and them. The intimate, personal love of God is always towards "we."