

# Sermons at Christ Church

## *Building Relationships through Love.*

*Easter IV*

*Rev. Emmanuel Mercer*

***Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.***” This is a song of trust, providence, abundance, guidance, and protection. It is a song about the trustworthiness of God.

The psalmist voices the reality of and danger of evil and then assures us that even in the midst of the worst moments of those evils, we can entrust ourselves into the comforting and protective arms of God.

It assures us that God can exercise God’s salvation through a sacramental representative who saves us from the valley of the shadow of death. Because of the presence of the sacramental representative, our worry shouldn’t be about the dangers of the valley of death and evil but about his constant presence.

The sacramental representative is the shepherd who stands between the predator and the prey and sacrifices his life for the prey. Because the shepherd sacrifices his own life, for the life of the sheep, the shepherd doesn’t promise a soft life. I have a sister who really likes soft life. The shepherd doesn’t promise an easy life or a honky dory life. The shepherd doesn’t say if, suggesting that evil is conditional. For the shepherd, the question of evil isn’t if but when.

At the center of the spirituality of the psalm is the belief that there are bad guys out there, there are monsters, there’s suffering and there is evil. It is believed that David wrote the psalm at one of the darkest moments of his life.

In writing the psalm, David reflected on his own life as a shepherd—a man who tended sheep and protected the sheep. Remember when the prophet Samuel came by Jesse’s house to anoint a king, each of Jesse’s sons were home save from David.

After examining all the sons, Samuel asked Jesse ‘Are these all your children?’ Jesse responded that ‘I have one who is a shepherd and is with the sheep in the field.’ David would later say that as a

shepherd he protected his sheep, sometimes at the peril of his own life. David recounts killing a lion and a bear for attacking his sheep.

We learn from David that the mark of a shepherd isn't only the recognition of the danger of evil, but that evil in itself is insufficient in determining the life of the sheep.

The sheep can therefore rest easy and secure and can go through the valley of the shadow of death because it relies not upon itself but on the shepherd. And because it relies on the shepherd, it listens to the voice of the shepherd and it's never afraid because the shepherd is always near. We hear echoes of triumph.

Two critical moments in Jesus' life where we realize another voice which isn't the voice of the shepherd. First, during his temptation by Satan where the conflicting voice of Satan sought to upend everything he had come to know and believe about his relationship with God. Jesus' relationship with God was grounded in trust and as tempting as the voice of Satan was, he knew that that wasn't the voice of God. And because it wasn't the voice of God it wasn't trustworthy. And so he overcame the temptation. We hear echoes of triumph.

The second was during the night of his betrayal. After he had shared a meal with his friends, washed their feet and walked with them to the Garden of Gethsemane, he asked them to keep watch and pray while he goes yonder for prayer. During prayer he was again confronted with an inner voice that questioned why he wanted to follow through on God's plan for salvation. He understood the difficulty of the moment.

He understood the challenge that lay ahead of him. He knew of the evil that lurked in the shadows. He heard a voice like the one he heard during his temptation, asking him to choose his own path because God isn't faithful nor trustworthy. Choose your own path because you cannot handle the calamity that lay ahead of you. Do not go through the suffering, it isn't worth it. But Jesus knew that that voice wasn't the voice of God.

And because it wasn't the voice of God, Jesus chose to listen to the voice of triumph by going through God's plan of salvation. And because he listened to God's voice of triumph, God proved himself trustworthy through the resurrection. We hear echoes of triumph.

The resurrection isn't a big miracle that was meant to show us how powerful Jesus is. The Resurrection is the one thing, that one claim of Christianity that reverses death and repairs our relationship with God.

It is the pathway through which we can accept that Jesus is who he says he is, and the pathway through which we can accept Christianity as representing a voice of triumph in the midst of evil and death.

There is a story of a young boy who used to visit his grandmother every summer with his parents. One summer, his father was engaged at work and so he told the boy that the family couldn't travel to visit grandma. But the boy responded that he was grown and the father could send him by himself. The father asked if he was sure. He responded that he was sure. The father bought the six-year-old a train ticket and put him in a railway car and sent him off. But the father knew that however prepared and courageous the boy might be, danger could arise once the train set off and the boy was by himself.

But before leaving, he told the boy that just in case you feel fearful. I am giving you this ring with a little box on it, when you feel fearful, open it and you will find the solution. The moment the train sped off, all kinds of strangers swelled around the boy making him grow less courageous. He begun to panic and begun to wonder to himself, 'What do I do?'

He then remembered what the father had told him 'My child, when you feel fearful, look in the box for the solution.' The boy turned to the ring and opened the little box and there was a note written by the father "My son" said the note, "don't worry I am in the next car." His father had secretly taken a day off to accompany the boy on the train ride to his grandmother. When the boy lifted his eyes after reading the note, he saw his father standing next to him.

The father knew that there was no way the boy could travel by himself. And the shepherd knows that because of the dangers of evil, there is no way that the sheep can travel this path by themselves. And so, the shepherd stays close by the sheep and watches the gate just so the thief cannot come into the fold and destroy. The shepherd doesn't abandon the sheep because he understands his sacramental role in the life of the sheep.

There is a story about an elderly couple who were getting ready for bed one night. But then out of nowhere the wife said 'I am just so hungry for ice cream. And there is none in the house.' 'I'll get

some for you.' Said the husband. 'You're a darling.' She said, and then she continued, "I want vanilla with chocolate sauce." 'Vanilla with chocolate sauce.' He repeated. 'Write it down, you might forget.' 'I won't forget," he said. And then she said, 'Get some whip cream on top.' He repeated 'Vanilla with chocolate sauce with whip cream on top.' And then she said 'And a cherry on top.' He repeated 'Vanilla with chocolate sauce with whip cream and a cherry on top.' She said, 'Please write it down, you might forget.' "I won't forget. Vanilla with chocolate sauce with whip cream and cherry on top.'

And away he went. By the time he got back she was already in bed and so he handed her the paper bag. When she opened it there was a ham sandwich. And then she said 'I told you to write it down. You forgot the mustard.'

The presence of evil means that the shepherd must always be close by the sheep. And the sheep does two things, one, listen to the voice of the shepherd, and two entrusts the life into the care of the shepherd.

To listen to the voice of the shepherd is to hear the voice of triumph. The Christian story is one of triumph in Christ Jesus. The triumph came at great cost, but it assures us that the valley of death wouldn't have the last word. Evil will not have the last word. God triumphs over every evil. And there is no better way of hearing that voice of triumph than to see the resurrection community sharing their resources together. It was a way of reminding each other that despite our different and varying circumstances, we dare to entrust ourselves into the care of each other. To each, the other is a shepherd or has the potential to be a shepherd.

Second, to entrust our life into the care of the shepherd is to be reminded that the shepherd has already laid down his life for us. And the shepherd is the bridge on which we can walk from where we are to where we need to be. We didn't build the bridge; there are no tolls to cross the bridge and no fees required to cross the bridge. It only takes one simple step that says that I entrust myself into the care of the shepherd because I know that the shepherd is trustworthy. God is trustworthy and that is why we triumph over every valley of death. Amen.