

**Shepherds of the Earth
1st John 3:16-24 and Psalm 23**

Cherokee Park United Church
Sunday April 26th, for Earth Day 2015 - Tom Evans

“Shepherd” as the name for the role of Jesus or Holy Spirit or God or “E” all of the above - is so common that we – well at least - I - didn’t think much of it. In coming to sit with this scripture, which initially was personally difficult for me on a number of fronts, I finally did some listening and a little more reading and realized that Shepherd and flock is an amazing description for the relationship we have with our loving God.

I was reminded of the James Herriot books on tape that were part of the 22 hour car trips to NJ to visit grandparents with my kids. James had an interesting job as a rural vet and we learned all about the care of animals. Now, if there is no vet to call in the middle of the night then the shepherd is the midwife. If there is no vet to call in the middle of the rainstorm, then the Shepherd fixes the broken leg in the rain, in the mud and maybe the sheep is less than grateful. If there is no guard on duty early in the morning, it’s the Shepherd that has to run off the wolf with rod and staff.

I have to constantly remind myself that these one word descriptions in Scripture –for the time that scripture was written - such as “Shepherd” - would have brought up images of real, earthy, hard-work dangerous and intensely personal experience – not an abstract pastoral metaphor. The local Governor would not be expected to be called a Shepherd. Not sleeping in the fields with a bunch of sheep and waiting up all night to be midwife.

**The reading, First John 3:16-24 starts:
“We know love by this, the he laid down his life for us”**

This is, or was not easy words for me. I would rather not dwell on that and how it happened to the Good Shepherd. I would much rather focus on Resurrection and Joy and Glorious futures then consider this. However, I have a new perspective – the

perspective of our Shepherd and our neighbors choosing to care so deeply about their calling, about their passion for helping those around them that they would and do knowingly put themselves in harm's way to protect their sheep – or us.

Our fire fighters and rescue workers come to mind. The vast majority of our police and service members. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, of course. I have this reframing that just as a fire fighter wakes up every morning knowing that if the pager goes off they will also do whatever it takes – but having every expectation that they will live through it – that perhaps the fire fighter and Jesus wake up focused on their passion for helping make the world a better place and not on what might happen.

The reading also say: I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

Did the humanity of Jesus mean that he could guess what was coming – maybe not exactly when – or who, but if you poke Authority in the eye too many times and don't move around enough they are going to notice... Or did the Son of God know exactly when and where... Either way, He willingly lay down his life – did whatever he could – to show a way of living centered on Love of God, Love of Neighbor, and Love of self.
((A Thank you seems right, not really enough, but right maybe every day.))

Back to the start, the reading says: “We know love by this, the he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?

Yes! We live the best part of our lives when we find ourselves helping each other - loving each other – give time to each other – just listening to each other – caring for each other. This is also to “lay down our lives for one another”.

The letter continues:

Little Children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

My introduction to this community... (Thanks Phyl!) included Words and Truth ...and

Action. Singing and talking and smiles and handshakes and hugs ...and... words of action outside the walls of Sunday morning greeted me the first day. Love in Action by children of all ages for “All you Works of God”... for our students, for immigrants, for neighbors, for Equality.

And... Last fall on Fred and Doug's first anniversary, twelve hundred miles away there was also a whole lot of talking and love and action – and prayer.

My Aunt Sr. Carol, Mom's little Sister and a Dominican nun, taught in the Bronx years ago and happen to teach Arlene Flaherty – now Sr. Arlene. Carol sent me an article from the Global Sisters Report where Sr. Arlene was interviewed before the People's Climate March. She said:

“Sisters have been weaving advocacy with contemplative life and direct service and have been at the forefront”... the writer fills in... of environmental awareness and justice. Flaherty is the director of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office for the School Sisters of Notre Dame and a justice promoter for the Dominican Sisters.

[The quote continues] **“We are giving voice to the pleas and cries of the earth, and to beg for mercy and intervention,”** she said. **“The climate march is not just an act – it’s also a prayer, a response to, and an engagement with, the self-disclosure of God’s presence. Our sisters work around the world to restore earth’s systems and bring attention to right relationships with the earth. More deeply, we’re trying to integrate the theology of creation. We’re not just stewards.”**

We ... all... choose ... to lay down our life, we all make choices to step into the needs of our children or parents and grandparents or friends or strangers. We find or we will find those places that call us to care deeply, to sacrifice sleep or time or convenience because we have been called by Holy Spirit to live ...and to love. Sometimes it just happens and sometimes we get thoughtful and deliberate about our Personal Declarations - our Intentions that become words... that become acts that are our prayers. We are about to see a short video... What I think of as the loudest minute of silence

possibly ever recorded in history – thousands of people becoming intentionally and reverently quiet to honor those who have been harmed by Climate change - and to form a Spiritual Connection to each other and to us. This is also a chance to think about your own roles as Shepherd.

Keep in mind that until just a moment before the video starts everyone was talking loud enough to be herd – it was really loud...

People's Climate March Moment of Silence Video

As you head, a roar ran through the march like a freight train. I am glad we could share that connection with these 400,000 best friends that are acting as Shepherds – for each other and for our Earth – our home.

I have very high expectations for Climate Care.

I expect – it is my declaration, that this work – this prayer, leads to the closest thing we human beings can manage.... to creating Heaven on Earth. It goes like this:

First, if burning fossil fuels did not lead to dangerously changing the climate by taking the carbon in the coal, oil, and gas – and in the fire combining it with oxygen to make CO₂. ... Remember the one about what weighs more, a pound of feathers or a pound of lead?Well, for every coal train full of carbon from the fire that makes the electricity we delivery over one and a half trains full of CO₂ to the atmosphere... or from a 2012 report, more than 2.4 million tons per second.

I'll start again.... If burning carbon didn't lead to dangerous climate change we would go along with business as usual. I like my electricity, my heat, and my gasoline and I... that is we ...would continue to live with really big oil spills now and then. And live with train explosions once in a while. And Coal Ash spills in our rivers. And mercury in the

water and the air. And police actions “protecting” the drilling from the locals. And.....And trillion dollar oil wars – Oil wars to make sure OUR oil... under THEIR land is safe ...for US. We obviously would put up with all of thisbecause we live with it today and have for a hundred years.

Since fossil fuels do in fact destroy the climate = we = must = stop. We have to decide, and its PEOPLE that are deciding and leading, not CEOs or our representatives... it is people that are deciding and demanding that we find a way to heat our homes without gas, to run our cars without oil, and to generate electricity without coal – everywhere.

This is a Glorious Awesome Gift. A Holy Spirit Gift, giving us the opportunity to love each other and love the earth and help it heal. The wakeup call of Climate Change is an opportunity for us to work together to create Heaven on Earth.

When we are not burning millions of barrels of oil we won't have oil wars. Not. Ever. Again. When we stop burning millions of tons of coal, we won't be destroying our mountain tops or have to dredge the sludge out of our rivers. We will stop the fracking and the earthquakes that no one wants to claim. We will stop wasting lots less water for power plant steam. And we will use less food for fuel and we use less fuel to grow our food!

Heaven on Earth includes the ability to have abundant clean power in any town or village in India, China, Africa, rural US or anywhere – and use the extra energy to clean up the dirty well water or dirty river water, or turn salty water into fresh water. And have enough water. And grow local food. Heaven on Earth means less reason to fight wars for oil and less reason to fight wars for land.

Heaven on Earth also gets a nudge when energy comes from 100s of companies making

solar panels and wind generators and batteries instead of a hand full of fossil fuel companies that seem to have a direct line to our Representatives – and military help on demand. This will help shift the balance of power from the few to the many.

Heaven on Earth is about us – people everywhere, Shepherds everywhere – finding our collective voices. Choosing to lay down our Lives. Just as voices stopped an unjust war of violence with guns and bombs, they can also stop an unjust war of violence on our Earth that routinely includes violence on those with the smallest voice and least power in our family.

Climate Justice is Everything Justice.

Heaven on Earth is not free – demanding that those making handsome profits and those receiving financial or political support from the profits – demanding that they change, and change promptly is hard. Some are fighting back.

The path to Heaven on Earth also a challenge to each of us to listen and talk to our neighbors and maybe family. Those who may have reason to not trust the same sources we trust and may believe that the answer is we have to walk instead of drive, and become Bug Eaters and that's No Choice At All. No one I know wants to walk everywhere or eat bugs.

I believe we can clean and protect and cherish and love the Earth – that we can Shepherd the Earth, without having to demand instant drastic change.

Four things help us get to the abundant clean energy - Heaven on Earth.

One – scientists and engineers continue to figure out how to have cheaper and cheaper solar power, wind power, and really big batteries - and it is all in the nick of time.

Two, we can shift the whole economy, US and World. There is good independent validation that the idea of putting a small annually increasing price on carbon at the well-head, coal mine, and border, and giving all of the money back to all households, will signal the whole economy – everything – to shift away from carbon for fuel, or fertilizer, or packaging, and so on. And move to alternative energy and low carbon products... One independent evaluation of this idea says that over 20 years, the carbon fee and dividend would add 2.8 million new jobs and reduce C02 output by 50%.

Three – Our voices are getting louder. With the web everywhere and in the pockets of millions, we can find our voice and find each other across the country and the world, and be heard. Shepherds this time mostly need their words instead of rod and staff. Words of reason and love to convince our neighbors and our representatives to act. Political Will is some parts polite respectful conversation and some parts a loud noisy joyous worldwide march.

And Four – Holy Spirit calls all of us to be Shepherds... and the Earth is calling loud and clear for her Shepherds to come and help heal her broken bones – and her waters and her air. And that call leads to many Shepherds acting on climate and many many other needs as well – food justice, immigration justice, racial justice and much more

When you think about crafting a declaration for yourself as Shepherd, – there is room and an example on the back of “All You Works of God” – that time you spend thinking about your intentional acts of love is itself a prayer. A prayer for leadership or Shepherd-ship for yourself and those you love.

To refer to the song from our Passing of the Peace:

I am the light of the World
You People come andas your Shepherd... - follow me
If you follow and love
You will learn the mystery
Of what you were meant to Do and Be –
as Shepherds for those around you and our home and yourself

The work that you do for family and community are the acts of prayer that each of us chose in our lives. Our intentional willingness to follow and Love.

Amen.

1st John 3:16-24

“We know love by this, the he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and see a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?

Little Children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he as commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his names's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and staff -

they comfort me,
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.