

“I Shall Not Want”

Easter 24

Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Almighty God, through your only Son you overcame death and opened to us the light of eternity. Enlighten our minds and kindle our hearts with the presence of your Spirit, that we may hear your words of comfort and challenge for us today, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[A power outage in our neighborhood forced the church to worship outside on this Earth Sunday 2018. I am grateful for Deacons, Choir, staff and others who made this worship experience happen despite the challenges. There was sunshine and a beautiful spirit in the air as we worshipped this day.

Preaching note following Sunday worship.]

Each year on the fourth Sunday in the season of Easter, we hear Psalm 23 and a Gospel reading about Jesus the good shepherd. It is one of most beautiful and reassuring images of Jesus. The good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep; who knows the sheep by name, who leads them beside still waters. Jesus, the good shepherd, who tends the flock.

(9:00) The hymn we'll sing later reminds us of the reassurance nature of the living God, who will supply our need. It's the hymn of a Good Shepherd.

(11:00) The gospel hymn we sang a few moments ago, begins with the assurance that there is someone who "My Shepherd will supply my need. Jehovah is His name." It is the hymn of a Good Shepherd.

I want a Good Shepherd. Who doesn't want a Good Shepherd? Our souls are drawn to a good shepherd. That's the best reason I can give for why Sister Jean's bobblehead sold out.

Sister Jean Dolores-Schmidt is a 98-year-old nun. She leads the University of Loyola-Chicago men's basketball team in prayer before every game. She has been their chaplain for 25 years, long before this spring's publicity and fame. Last month, as the Ramblers made their improbable march to the Final Four, she became college basketball's most recognized new personality.¹

Within 48 hours of its release, Sister Jean's bobblehead became the best seller in the history of the National Bobblehead Hall of Fame and Museum.² Whether we are religious or not, our

¹ Sister Jean Dolores-Schmidt story from colleague, Ann Palmerton. I have borrowed heavily from her sermon *The Flock* with her permission.

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/sports/wp/2018/03/26/sister-jean-bobblehead-sets-sales-record>

souls are drawn to a good shepherd. People love Sister Jean. She's disarming and sassy.

An interviewer asks her, "What did you give up for Lent?" Sister Jean answers without missing a beat, "Losing."

And if being sassy isn't enough, Sister Jean knows basketball. She functions in an arena where we don't expect to find God. Besides being the grandmother everyone wants, she's an incredible good shepherd.

Except, if there's one thing Sister Jean knows at the core of her being, it's that she isn't the good shepherd. There's only one good shepherd, and it's not her. Sister Jean knows that she is simply part of God's flock. She is a sheep among sheep, in a flock which is bigger than her basketball team and Loyola, and even bigger than the Roman Catholic Church. There are many others in her flock; her team *and* the opposing team and for a while this spring, the whole American public.

Sister Jean knows she's part of this flock. And she treats others as if they are part of the flock, too, in ways that help them know they are loved and valued by God. She doesn't have a savior complex. She knows this isn't about her. She knows she needs the community and new life offered by God as much as the next person.

There's so much more to Sister Jean than her bobblehead fame. For decades, she has been an educator; a principal, coach and teacher. She lives in residence halls and talks every day with students. She leads a weekly prayer group for them. She knows the kid on the end of the bench is as valuable as the star player.

We're drawn to someone, like Sister Jean, who accepts us as we are. The great thing about her is that she finds ways to point beyond herself to the good shepherd. She knows who her shepherd is, and she reminds others that they are part of the flock. Not only people who go to church, but everyone and anyone.

Sister Jean knows her place in the flock. She understands herself as a part of the larger whole. She knows we are accountable to the good shepherd, and also accountable to one another.

However, there is so much of our lives that is out of our control. We want for a great deal in this life. We also fear for a great deal.

Things happen. There are real dangers out there; hired hands that run away, wolves that snatch and scatter. It is hard to entrust those we love to the good shepherd.

We are realists. We know the taste of fear.

Fear stalks us through our lives. Our first fears, when we are very young, are separation and the dark. Then come getting lost and being left out. Think of what we fear today. The death of a loved one or the end of a relationship. A transition in life, or the loss of employment. The loss of memory or ability, or not being included in a friend group, leaving home or the prospect of being alone.

The presence of fear in our lives is real. It is hard to trust ourselves and those we love to the good shepherd.

As a culture and a country, we experience fear: fear of loss of status in the world, the end of upward mobility; fear of the stranger or of anyone who is different. Our fears drive our decisions, they influence elections, and they weigh on us. Our fears rob us of abundant life.

Jesus speaks to our individual and collective fears. I am the Good Shepherd.

To our desire to belong: “I know my own and my own know me” (10:14)

To our fear of bullies, and our longing to do what’s right: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11).

To our fear of the stranger: “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” (10:16).

There is a connection between the promises of the good shepherd and our ongoing celebration of the Easter season. Easter isn't a one-time holiday. It is a season, and even more than that, it is a way of life. Easter life is guided by the promise that something more is going on.

Jesus is saying, “I am bigger than you know. I'm everywhere. At times I may be unrecognizable to you. Don't worry about that. I operate in all places.” Life and love, in the power of God's Spirit, multiply as they are shared. Fear loses its grip and we can taste abundant life.

This Shepherd never leaves us alone. When we walk through life's darkest valley, in the shadows, perhaps of our own making.... God will be with us, never to abandon us or leave us to our own devices. God offers protection, comfort and, somewhat surprisingly, abundance.

Easter's good news is that Jesus returns to us and will never let us go. The Good Shepherd accompanies the flock, morning and night, and finds ways to use our lives and our words to care for others.

The hymn concludes with the words of assurance, that all are known, all are loved, all are children of God.

“The sure provisions of my God, Attend me all my days.

O May Your House be my abode, And all my word be praise.

There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come;

No more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.”³

As the Shepherd supplies our need.... we shall not want. It's the assurance of the never-failing promises of God, the One who cares and watches and embraces us always. The Good Shepherd who knows your name. The shepherd who knows all our names.

Thanks be to God.

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³ Isaac Watts, 1719, My Shepherd Will Supply My Need, Psalm 23. Hymn 172, Presbyterian Hymnal, 1992.