

The fourth Sunday of Easter every year is a day when we focus on the scriptural image of Jesus as our shepherd.

We read Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd.  
We heard in our Epistle lesson that Jesus is "the shepherd and guardian of (our) souls."<sup>1</sup>

And each year as our Gospel lesson we read about a third of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, the chapter where Jesus speaks of himself as our Good Shepherd.

In fact, this Sunday is often nicknamed "Good Shepherd Sunday."

And so, on this Sunday every year I usually preach about Jesus being our shepherd.

But this year I'd like to shift the focus a little bit. Instead of focusing on Jesus as our shepherd, I'd like to focus for a few moments on what it means to follow Jesus. If he is our shepherd, if he does call us to follow him, how do we go about doing it?

One of the classic answers actually comes from our lesson from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts. This reading didn't talk about Jesus or God as our shepherd. But it does give us a wonderful window into how the early Christians sought to follow their shepherd.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts is very early in the church's history. The church actually begins in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts. We'll read that section in 4 weeks on the Feast of Pentecost, the birthday of the church. At the beginning of Acts 2, the Holy Spirit gives gifts of ministry to the early Christians. They go out into the streets sharing the good news of Jesus. Peter preaches the first Christian sermon. It's a pivotal moment.

But then, towards the end of that chapter, there's a wonderful statement made in Acts 2:42.

It says that the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

There are 5 parts to that verse. First is the introduction that "they devoted themselves." Then it lists the 4 things they devoted themselves to. Each of these parts is important.

"They devoted themselves":

The term describes single-minded faithfulness/fidelity to God. The first Christians made God the center of their lives. It also implies a perseverance, continuing in the pattern for the long haul.

"The apostles' teaching":

The early Christians shared with each other the proclamation that would later be written and preserved in the New Testament: the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus, his ethical teachings, his works of healing and mercy.

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<sup>1</sup> 1Peter 2:25

"Fellowship":

Literally "the fellowship." The Greek word is *koinonia*, a sharing together in something. The early church considered themselves a new community, a new family. They spent time with each other, sharing their lives with each other.

"The breaking of bread", and "the prayers":

These two parts are both important, but are probably flipped in meaning when compared to our culture. "The prayers" probably implies more formal corporate worship, at first in the Jewish Temple itself. The prayers are more public. The breaking of bread probably refers to more informal, home-based, more private type of early Christian worship. Both types of worship are important. One cannot be jettisoned in favor of the other.

These are all important practices. These are all vital parts of living the Christian life. They're so important they're often termed the "Four marks of the church." They are four characteristics of living the Christian life. Four landmarks, if you will, of following our Good Shepherd along the Christian path through life.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

It's not a bad pattern for us to follow:

1. Persevering in making and keeping God at the center of our lives, the hub from which the rest of our activities radiate out like spokes on a bicycle wheel.
2. Grounding ourselves in the reading and study of scripture, and engaging in learning more about God.
3. Gathering with and supporting our fellow Christians in living the Christian life together.
4. Making worship and prayer a priority, both in public and in private, in church and at home.

In fact, we promise to do all these things in our baptisms. It's part of our baptismal covenant. I ask a question that comes straight from Acts 2:42.

"Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?"

And you answer,

"I will, with God's help."<sup>2</sup>

Why do we promise to do these things? Yes, the early church did them? But are they still important?

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<sup>2</sup> BCP p304

One of the best answers comes from the best scripture scholar in our tradition. Bishop Tom Wright speaks of these 'four marks of the church.' He says,

"The apostles' teaching; the common life of those who believed; the breaking of bread; and the prayers. These four go together. You can't separate them, or leave one out, without damage to the whole thing. Where no attention is given to teaching, and to constant, lifelong Christian learning, people quickly revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture, and end up with their minds shaped by whichever social pressures are most persuasive, with Jesus somewhere around as a pale influence or memory. Where people ignore the common life of the Christian family (the technical term often used is 'fellowship,' which is more than friendship, but not less), they become isolated, and often find it difficult to sustain a living faith. Where people no longer share regularly in 'the breaking of bread' (the early Christian term for the simple meal that took them back to the Upper Room 'in remembrance of Jesus'), they are failing to raise the flag which says, 'Jesus' death and resurrection or the centre of everything.' And whenever people do all these things but neglect prayer, they are quite simply forgetting that Christians are supposed to be heaven-and-earth people. Prayer makes no sense whatever—unless heaven and earth are designed to be joined together, and we can share in that already."<sup>3</sup>

What Bishop Wright is talking about, what Acts 2:42 is talking about, what our Baptismal covenant is talking about, is engaging in classic spiritual practices.

This is something we should be paying attention to, for the health of our own souls, and for the health of our church family.

You may not know it, but the vestry spent a Friday and Saturday in March with a consultant about taking the next steps forward at St. Paul's. And our consultant recommended a book to us, entitled, *The Practicing Congregation*.

Your vestry is even engaged in reading and discussing this book together, and we even had an extra meeting last week to discuss next steps.

The vestry has not yet read ahead to chapter 4. But in chapter 4, there is a remarkable finding based on research. Congregational health and vitality directly correlates to the degree to which members in the congregation engage in spiritual practices. Not just coming together for worship on Sundays. But also having disciplines of prayer and scripture reading at home during the week.<sup>4</sup>

It concludes, "the more emphasis a congregation gives to the values of home and personal religious practices the higher the congregation's vitality and the more likely it is to be growing in membership."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part One*

<sup>4</sup> see Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, p67ff

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p67

But you might think, that's all well and good, but how do I do it? How do I engage more deeply in scripture reading and prayer.

Well, there are an infinite number of ways you could approach scripture reading and prayer.

I'll mention just a couple resources you might consider.

If you're into using the web, I would direct you to our webpage: "[stpaulslubbock.org](http://stpaulslubbock.org)"

Then click on the link to "Spiritual resources."

On that page are a number of resources. Towards the bottom are several links to daily devotional guides. A daily devotional is a handy tool for daily prayer. You can access these on the web or on your phone.

The first one listed on our webpage is the one I would recommend first. It is a classic Episcopalian devotional, known as *Forward Day by Day*.

If you don't like using the web, we do also have available at St. Paul's a few published hard copies of *Forward Day by Day* in the hallway tract racks.

You can use this devotional at several different levels. Whether it's the web version or the printed version, the content is the same.

At the top of the page is a verse of scripture. Then it's followed by a meditation. If you're not currently doing any daily Bible reading, committing to reading at least a verse a day is a good first step.

Also, *Forward Day by Day* has some other options if you want to dig a little deeper.

On this day, you might notice that the verse of the day (in this case Luke 5:3)<sup>6</sup> is pulled out of a larger section, in this case, Luke 5:1-11. If you're using the printed version, you could grab a Bible and read that larger section. If you're using a web version, you could just click on the link, and it'll take you to the larger reading.

And if you want to go further than that, there are other scripture references listed at the bottom of the page. In fact, every day you'll find an Old Testament reading, some Psalms, and Epistle reading, and a Gospel reading for each day. (These readings are also listed in the back of the prayer book in some rather confusing tables. Using *Forward Day by Day* is much easier to navigate.) If you read all of the suggested scriptures on the page, you would end up reading all 4 Gospels once a year, the rest of the New Testament every two years, and 2/3rds of the Old Testament every two years.

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<sup>6</sup> May 4, 2017

There are other ways to read scripture and pray as well. There are other links and guides on our website. And I'd be glad to talk privately with you about any of them. The important thing is to find a way that works for you. Because one of the best ways to listen for the voice of our Good Shepherd is through scripture and prayer.

Another vital way to listen is through silence. We have such a lack of silence in our culture. That means it's vitally important to cultivate silent spaces and times in our lives. It's often necessary to turn down the volume on all of the other voices screaming for our attention in order to hear the still small voice of God.

I don't know about your prayer life. I know in mine it's tempting for me to talk too much, and not listen enough. It's easy to offer praise and to offer my prayer requests. But it's much more difficult to spend some time in silence as well. And yet, in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world, silence in God's presence is one of the most important things we can cultivate in our prayer life.

Of course, there are other ways as well. God often speaks through the marvels of his creation. God can also speak to us through other people. But in all cases we have to pay attention and listen.

Listening to our shepherd's voice. That's a vital part of being a Christian. But there's more involved than just listening. There's also following. Sheep LISTEN to the shepherd's voice and FOLLOW where he leads.

How do we follow? Acts 2:42 speaks of private prayer and study and continuing to worship together.

The school year is winding down. Summer vacation is coming. But St. Paul's will still have services every Sunday. If you're in town, continue to come. If you're travelling, find another church and visit them.

And if you're on the road, don't forget your spiritual disciplines. Take your Bible with you. Or get a Bible app for your phone. Pray using the prayer book. Or pray using one of the websites recommended on our website under "spiritual resources."

In the earliest days of the Church, they followed Jesus by continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. Nearly 2,000 years later, we're called to follow our Lord in the same way. The Good Shepherd loves you. He calls you by name. How will you follow?