

God Will Take Care of You

Years ago when Margo and the kids were visiting relatives in Montana and I was home alone, our cat, Kirby, got out of the house late at night and disappeared completely. I looked for many hours for that kitty cat, well into the morning of the next day. Since this was Saturday night into Sunday, I could not search all night, so for the couple hours I lay in bed I did not sleep very well.

Several days later when Margo and the kids got home, Kirby was still missing. We looked for that silly cat for many hours both in the car and on foot, and had begun to feel sick that he might never come back. Margo even brought pictures of Kirby through several neighborhoods to try and enlist the help of all the neighbors on the surrounding streets. Then it happened.

We received a phone call from a man just a block away who had captured Kirby in his porch. The mystery was over, the cat was found and we were very happy. The emotions we felt while Kirby was missing were sadness and grief because we cared for and loved him so much. As for Kirby, I am pretty sure that he could not really appreciate just how much we really cared.

I think we find ourselves in the same position in our relationship with God. We are described in the Bible in several places in the Old and New Testament as sheep. We are sheep who have a lot of needs and who are often lost in life. Since we are needy and lost, we hardly appreciate that we have a shepherd, a good shepherd who cares for and loves for us very much.

Every year in the season of Easter, we have what is called Shepherd Sunday. On this day we read Psalm 23, and a passage from John, chapter 10, which are the verses about Jesus as the good shepherd. In these passages we have a face to face look at the Lord who like a good shepherd, spends his whole life and eternal existence, caring for and loving needy and lost sheep.

How are we needy and lost sheep? Well, we simply need to look our lives and the world in which we live. Are we not often like our cat Kirby all those years ago, lost and wandering through the world, looking for home where there is the care and love we need in life? I am not saying that we are hopeless and helpless, but we often really struggle and wonder if anyone cares.

For example: Maybe we have in the past or we are currently in the present time committing some sin that is against ourselves, God, and some other person. It may be that we consider this sin so terrible that we wonder if God, our families and friends, even those closest to us, could care for and love us if they really knew about it. Worst yet, maybe we are struggling to stop this sin.

Another example: Perhaps we have a personal struggle or family issue that will not go away and makes us wonder if anyone cares. Maybe it's a serious illness; or we are deeply grieving the death of someone we love; or we feel really lonely in the world; or we have an emotional struggle that makes us feel very anxious; or we are experiencing real stress or separation in our family.

A third example: Just look into the world and see all that is hard out there. Go ahead and watch the cable news stations. Children are hungry; nations are at war; people are dying of really terrible diseases; poverty seems like an epidemic; and there is so much anger and hate out there. Does God really care about such a world where there is so much (including our lives) that is broken?

Well, on Shepherd Sunday in the season of Easter we say, "Yes, we believe that even though the world is full of lost and needy sheep, there is a Lord who is a really good shepherd, who cares for, loves and even saves this world." This is our proclamation to each other and to the world around us. Jesus is risen and he stands alongside us as good shepherd to care for and love us.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus says that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Here he compares himself to a hired hand that does not really care for us sheep, and a wolf who would just soon eat us sheep. The hired hand and the wolf are those other people and forces in the world that simply can not or will not help us when we are needy and lost.

He, on the other hand is the good shepherd who not only cares for and loves us, but who lays down his life for us. That means two really important things: First, it means that he will do battle with the things in the world that harm us. Like a shepherd who uses his staff to fend off wolves from harming the sheep, the Lord Jesus uses his life and his eternal existence to help us in our struggles.

Second, when Jesus speaks of laying down his life for the sheep, he also means that he died for us sheep as well. He as shepherd cared for us and loved us so much that he willingly died for us on the cross, so that even though we do struggle with sin, we are forgiven. And even though we do face death at some point in our mortal existence, we have the gift of everlasting life.

When we were searching for Kirby the week or so he was gone, we did whatever we could to care for and love him, and eventually, it worked. What we did, somehow, with the help of good neighbors, brought Kirby home. It meant that we were able to spend many more years with that silly cat caring for him, loving and enjoying him. It's what pet owners seek to do for the pets they love.

The good shepherd, Jesus, also hopes to care for us, love and enjoy us, in this life, yes, but also in the life to come, in heaven and in everlasting life. That is

why he does everything for us; even lay down his life. We may face a few wolves out there, we may be really needy and lost at times, but Jesus, the good shepherd is risen, alongside of us, caring for and loving us.

I was visiting someone recently who was facing the hardest moment in her life. A number of things were wrong with her family and with her own health. She had every reason to fall apart. She was definitely needy and I bet she at one point felt completely lost. Yet when I conversed with her before some life saving surgery, she said what I really love to hear believers say.

She said, "I feel I will be ok because I am in God's hands." When we talked about what she said, she was confessing that whether she lived or died she was in good hands. She was in the good hands of the good shepherd. We even read John 10 together. She was in her time of need able to believe that the Lord cared for and loved her because she was one of his beloved sheep.

Jesus has laid his life down for us sheep. He is our good shepherd and now stands alive, risen and alongside us. Whatever sin or struggle or trouble you and I face, we face it in the strong presence of our good shepherd, who has come to care for and love us and fend off the wolves of this world that might harm us. He is with us right now, this day, this week, in every circumstance of our lives.

Even if we are really lost for some time, like Kirby was, he does not give up any more than we gave up on Kirby. Jesus, the good shepherd, will search for us himself and through our neighbors, until he can personally care for and love us. So even in our times where we wonder if anyone really cares, we can trust and believe that we are sheep who are deeply cared for by a good shepherd.

One additional thought: In our second reading, we read that since Jesus laid down his life for us, we also ought to lay down our lives for one another. In other words, we are called to care for and love each other. We are called to help each other when we are needy and lost. We are called to reach out to people in the world and help our good shepherd help his other sheep.

Just like our neighbor helped us find Kirby, we are called to help the good shepherd find each other in the world. In this way, we are never alone, nor is it ever just you or me with Jesus all by ourselves. We are a flock who are cared for and loved by a good shepherd, who calls to care for and love each other. As Jesus says, one flock, one shepherd. What a beautiful, godly, heavenly vision.

Amen.