

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
APRIL 17, 2016**

"LEAD ME, JESUS"

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Our simple EASTER PRAYER for today: *LEAD ME, JESUS!* After all, if we are going to be *WALKING WITH JESUS* through this Easter season, we need a LEADER! And how does Jesus respond? He says, *"My sheep hear My voice. I know them, and they follow Me."* When we call, He answers! When we come together, He is with us! Every day is a celebration of Jesus in our lives. Every Sunday is a celebration of Jesus resurrection. Every day is a day to say: CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!

And now, would you like to hear the shortest sermon ever? Would you like to have every bit of theology that is found in today's scripture readings summed up in just 9 words? Would you like to have every doctrine that the Church has ever believed reduced to just 1 line? I don't hear anyone objecting, so here goes. It all comes together in the profound theology of a little child who recited the 23rd Psalm the only way she could. She said, *"THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, THAT'S ALL I NEED!"* And to that, all God's children say AMEN!

But not necessarily as the end of the sermon! Besides, since you all are comfortable there and I am OK here there is no sense in stopping yet. Because the truth of the matter is, while we may confess and believe that Jesus our shepherd is indeed all "WE NEED" the rest of the story is about all the things WE WANT! No one has to tell us that life is NOT: ALL green pastures, and ONLY still waters! No one has to remind us that life is NOT: a peace-filled soul and a walk down right pathways! No one has to tell us that life is NOT: a table spread before us and our enemies going up in smoke, or our heads anointed with sweet smelling oil, or our cup running over! No one has to remind us that life is NOT: ALL goodness and ONLY mercy!

Because no one has to tell us, that every day of our lives we walk a few more steps in that valley of shadows and we spend a few more hours on the edge of panic and fear!

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, THAT'S ALL I NEED! Amen Lord! I could not have said it better! But please Lord, let me hear Your voice! Lord, know me better than I know myself! Lord, show me the way! LEAD ME, JESUS, and I will follow!

There is a story that comes from the very beginning of recorded history. It is a story that took place when much of the world was unexplored and unmapped. Back then, mapmakers had to have some way of showing what was beyond the known lands. So they symbolized those unknown areas with dragons and monsters. The message was clear! Unknown areas are dangerous! Stay away! The story is told of a commander in the Roman army, involved in a battle that took him into an area that was marked with dragons and monsters. The commander sent a message back to Rome: *"SEND NEW ORDERS! WE HAVE MARCHED OFF THE MAP!"*

If it is not enough for us to say *"THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, THAT'S ALL I NEED"* then the rest of our confession is based on the fact, that we live our lives believing that we really are, *MARCHING OFF THE MAP!* The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I need! BUT I'm marching off the map, into unknown territory, into uncharted waters. We are marching off the technology map, the political map, the economic map, the environmental map. We are marching off whatever map we use for directions. And how are we to find our way? THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, THE LORD IS MY WAY, THAT'S ALL I NEED! LEAD ME, JESUS!

Psalm 23, the 6 most comforting verses in all of scripture. And the 2 most powerful words in the entire Psalm are found in verse 4: *"THOUGH"* and *"THROUGH."* Psalm 23 does not say *"IF, I walk through the valley of shadows!"* Psalm 23 says, *"THOUGH."* It is inevitable! I WILL walk in the valley of shadows! Life is not all green pastures, still waters and overflowing cups. Sometimes our head is not anointed with oil, but we get smacked upside the head with a two-by-four, and crammed with way too much information. Sometimes we hear bad news and we struggle to get through a lousy Monday. Sometimes we are not resting on the beach by still waters, but we are marching off the map into the valley of dragons and water full of sea monsters.

"THOUGH" none of us go without a walk in the valley, the psalmist makes it clear that God does not intend for us to stay there. The valley of shadows is something we go *"THROUGH."* Valleys are not resting places but pathways. We can walk through our trials and tribulations. We can walk through our sorrows and sadness. We can walk through our problems and pain. We can even walk through our faults and failings and mistakes. As long as we believe, that even in this journey *"OFF THE MAP"* our Lord is leading us. For it is Jesus, our Good Shepherd, the voice we hear and follow, who turns our *"THOUGH"* into our *"THROUGH."* *THOUGH* we walk in the valley, we are not alone. LEAD ME, JESUS THROUGH the valley!

And the difference between a lifetime *IN* the valley and a trip *THROUGH* the valley is the difference between looking at the Church as a *CAVE* or a *TUNNEL*. A cave is where one goes in and comes out at the same place. A tunnel is where one goes in one place and comes out in a different place. The Church must see itself as a tunnel, not a cave. If we come out of Church at the same place we went in, then something is terribly wrong. If we have not left behind some of the baggage we carried in, and if we have not picked up some of the support that we need, then something is terribly wrong. If we come out with the same time, talents and treasures with which we went in, then something is terribly wrong. If we did not *GET* and did not *GIVE*, then something is terribly wrong. LEAD ME, JESUS!

But if we hear the voice of our Good Shepherd, and if we follow the voice of our Good Shepherd, then the light at the end of the tunnel is the eternal light and the eternal love of Jesus our Savior. So *LISTEN* to the voice of the Good Shepherd: *"OH, CHILD OF GOD, MY ROD AND MY STAFF THEY COMFORT YOU, MY GOODNESS AND MERCY THEY FOLLOW YOU, AND MY HOUSE IS PREPARED FOR YOU. SO, FOLLOW ME!"*

One more story! Pastor Paul is on his way to an appointment but is running late. So he puts the pedal to the metal and sure enough the lights and siren are on his tail. "Do you know the speed limit?" the officer asks. "Yes, 30 miles per hour." "May I see your license, and what do you do for a living?" Pastor Paul responds, "Normally, I'm delighted to answer, but in this case I'm embarrassed to say I'm a pastor." "Reverend there must be a parable here somewhere. How about this: We cannot have the shepherd outrunning the flock."

Let us pray. Great Shepherd, know us, love us and lead us. As we struggle to live in this pasture, LEAD US, JESUS! When we come with hunger and thirst, pain and sadness, doubt and fear, LEAD US, JESUS! Hold us in Your arms, call us, know us, love us and lead us, Dear Jesus. And all God's children say,

Amen.

Sola Deo Gloria!