

Good, love, Jesus. Three promising words given to us by Scripture today.

Good. Meriam-Webster says that good, used as an adjective, can mean “of a favorable character or tendency,” “agreeable, pleasant,” “adequate, satisfactory.” It can also mean something closer to the original Greek in this Scripture verse about the good shepherd, meaning “morally virtuous, kind, benevolent, competent or loyal.” Jesus says that we can count on his goodness and don't we all want to see goodness around us? Know that we will be met with selfless kindness from our friends, family, neighbors, politicians, and institutions? Don't we want to believe that moral excellence, virtuous action, and righteousness are behind all actions? Or even some actions? Jesus says to us today, “I am the good shepherd.” I am the morally excellent leaders of God's people. Standing in the middle of the Sanhedrin assembly of the elders of Jerusalem, the assembly charged with determining good from evil for the people, Jesus proclaims his goodness. He evokes images of other shepherds in the Hebrew Scriptures - Moses, King David, even God – to describe his leadership. The good shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep, who will care for them all, who will bring all of the sheep into the sheepfold and who will not let even one get lost. Leadership on a foundation of goodness.

Love. Such a misunderstood word in the English language. Searching for the meaning of love brings up all kinds of bland definitions of feelings. Wikipedia gives a good glimpse of how we define love culturally. It says, “Love is a variety of different feelings, states, and attitudes that ranges from interpersonal [affection](#) (“I love my mother”) to pleasure (“I loved that meal”). It can refer to an [emotion](#) of a strong [attraction](#) and personal [attachment](#). Love may be understood as a function to keep human beings together against menaces and to [facilitate the continuation of the species](#).” The definition continues. “As an abstract concept, *love* usually refers to a deep, [ineffable](#) feeling of tenderly caring for another person. Even this limited conception of love, however, encompasses a wealth of different feelings, from the passionate desire and intimacy of [romantic love](#) to the nonphysical emotional closeness of [familial](#) and [platonic love](#) to the profound [oneness](#) or devotion of [religious love](#).” “Religious 'love' might be considered a euphemistic term, more closely describing feelings of deference or [acquiescence](#).”

In this Wikipedia definition, love is couched in the realm of emotions, and when the emotions are good emotions, love is good. However, if we rely on a good emotional state for love to be good, it's seen as broken when there's trouble or the emotions become complicated. Love, in this definition, is an abstract concept, individualistic, and self-serving.

None of this has anything to do with the love that Jesus proclaims to us though, and the kind of love that the author of I John tells us about today. “We know love by this, that 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 help? Little children, let us love, not in word

or speech, but in truth and action.”

Love is known in truth and action. The Easter story is a real love story that teaches us what love is in truth and action. It is the story of God’s self-giving, self-risk, self-sacrifice as the cornerstone of love. It is the story of incarnation, love in the flesh, love that can be touched and tasted and felt. It is love of action and consequence. It is a story of love as a choice, a calling, and it is a story of love in the context of community. It is radically different from our culture’s notion of love as individualistic, abstract, or emotion-based. The Easter story is a story of transformed life of shared caring and The Good Shepherd is our model. Love as proclaimed in the New Testament is an attitude and a way of living. It requires decisions to lay aside what gets in the way of love. It is sacrificial. It takes work, and skill, and practice, and commitment.

Our understanding of love begins only with a conversation with God, like the Psalmist’s, in which we appreciate the depth of God’s love and care for us, just as we are. We learn to love each day as we make concrete decisions to act in ways which form the habit of love. Love is an acquired skill, and takes a lot of practice and work, and God’s grace. Love is not a private endeavor. Love is a decision. We are called to love despite how we feel from moment to moment.

God is our model of perfect love. Psalm 23 invites us into a world of deep trust, the abiding and steadfast reassurance that is founded on a relationship with God, our shepherd. In the ancient world of Israel, the shepherd was not only a caretaker of a herd of sheep, but the term shepherd also was used to refer to kingship and the political power a king held to actively intervene in the lives of his subjects. “The Lord is my shepherd.” Although we use Psalm 23 at funerals often, it is a psalm used for the anointing of a king. If I am this king’s subject, then my shepherd-king has power to protect me and secure resources for me, so much so that “I shall not be in want.” Belonging to the shepherd, I lack nothing to live a full and whole life. More than just solace or pastoral reassurance, the comfort promised to me is an active intervention that transforms my life; it is the comfort that Isaiah speaks of, a comfort that protects and heals life. The shepherd’s generosity is overpowering and overrides what I believe is possible. The only conclusion I can draw from being cared for by the shepherd-king is that communion with God is all I need for abundance in life. I trust that I am loved and that no thing and no person can separate me from God’s care.

Jesus, our third word from scripture today. If Psalm 23 is a love song between the Shepherd-king and the psalmist, John’s Gospel story of the Good Shepherd is a love song between God and all of humanity. Jesus says that love is possible because we are known by God and we belong to God. We belong to one flock, which has one shepherd, and our shepherd will go to any length for the flock, even death.

Jesus. The good shepherd. The vine. The one who comes that we might have abundant life. The one who comes to us not just as teacher, but as the Way, the truth and the life. He returns to us as the risen Christ, our advocate with the Father and our life eternal.

The Good Shepherd shows us the life of goodness and love. Enfleshed love

includes a deep involvement in the life of the other, a self-giving rooted in the relationship we are shown between the Father and the Son. That love depends on laying aside our preconceived notions about how our own lives will unfold, laying aside our individualistic notions of how love works in our lives, and making a commitment to living our lives with one another, to join the one flock that is guided by the one shepherd. Grace allows us the power, the choice to lay aside our own ideas about love, and to take up God's kind of love. It is a life-long pursuit and does not come without a cost, particularly in our culture. However, if we trust that we'll be safe and cared for by the Good Shepherd and the flock, it promises abundant life.

Three words that hold promise for us, regardless of what is going on in our lives or in the life of the world. Three words that are reflected by you when we gather, a window into the life of God and why gathering as a church community is so necessary and so powerful. Pure and lasting goodness; sacrificial and indissoluble love; Jesus, the shepherd who promises both goodness and love. Hold on to these words, claim them as promises for your own life and for the life of the world. We won't be disappointed.

Amen.