

May God's word only be spoken and heard here in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

A young mom was concerned about her kindergarten son walking to school alone. He didn't want his mother to walk with him. And mom wanted to give him the feeling that he had some independence but also know that he was safe. So she had an idea of how to handle it.

She asked her neighbor, Mrs. Goodnest, if she would please follow him to school in the mornings, staying at a distance, so he wouldn't notice her. Mrs. Goodnest said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed.

The next school day, Mrs. Goodnest and her little girl, Marcy, set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbor boy he knew. She did this for the whole week. As the boys walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, Timmy's little friend noticed the lady was following them as she seemed to do everyday all week.

Finally he said to Timmy, "Have you noticed that lady following us to school all week? Do you know her?"

Timmy nonchalantly replied, "Yeah, I know who she is." The friend said, "Well, who is she?"

"That's just Shirley Goodnest" Timmy replied, "and her daughter Marcy." "Shirley Goodnest? Who the heck is she and why is she following us?"

"Well", Timmy explained, "every night my Mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers, 'cuz she worries about me so much. And in the Psalm, it says 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life,' so I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

Every year the 4th Sunday of Easter is called Good Shepherd Sunday, and the Gospel is always from the 10th chapter of John, where Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. We also read/recite the 23rd Psalm, among the most comforting and certainly the most memorized passage of Scripture there is. And Mrs. Goodnest will follow us too!

I confess that the Shepherd metaphor is hard for me; I've never lived remotely near a farm, never met a sheep except in the zoo. But it is language that Scripture uses often to describe the relationship between God and God's people, to describe how the Lord cares for the nation as a shepherd would care for a flock.

Just as in the Psalm. And David, the author of the Psalm, himself was a shepherd. The Psalmist describes the Shepherd as the one who feeds, comforts, protects in the face of the trials of life, even death. And Jesus tells us that he will lay down his life for the sheep.

We are living in a very fearful time. People are confused and frightened. The economic fabric of our nation, and indeed our world, has disintegrated with a force and rapidity that only those old enough to remember the Great Depression can recall. We need something to allay our fears, to keep us from being paralyzed by the situation, which may even feel like "the valley of the shadow of death." The Good Shepherd is that person. The One who loves us enough to die for us. The One who protects us, comforts us, who offers hope, who saves us. The One who will be intentional about seeking after those not yet in the flock, about welcoming everyone, of every race and nation and ethnicity into the fold.

I come from a family who has lived into believing that the Good Shepherd will hold us and support us and walk with us through the “valley of the shadow of death”, for us the Armenian Genocide of 1915. I acknowledge that I have not been there, through that horrendous experience of death and destruction and displacement and desolation that my grandparents experienced. That my grandmother was left widowed at 27 with 3 children under 5, that she found her children after months of separation, by the grace of God, that she was reunited with them and then ended up in Egypt with her older brother’s help, that my father came to the U.S. and went to university and met and married mother at Ford Motor Company during World War II. I come from a family that struggled big time to figure out and understand where God was in all of this, and yet did not lose hope, did not lose faith, did not stop believing that the Good Shepherd would hold and bring them through it.

And I am here to tell you the story. Because it is my responsibility. The Genocide has been one of the defining events of my life. While my father, his siblings and my grandmother were the survivors, the next generation, my sisters, cousins, friends also carry on our souls and psyches the pain and the reality of this tragedy. April 24 marked the 94th anniversary of the beginning of this horrific event in April 1915, and the attempt at the systematic annihilation of the Armenian people by the government of Turkey.

My father was 4 years old when his father disappeared never to be seen again. My grandfather and the other Armenian young men of Ankara were called up on the pretext of serving in the Turkish army; most were killed outright.

My family’s story is not unique, but rather one of many, many such stories. Two of my grandmother’s siblings and their families perished, five of my grandfather’s siblings and their families also died. Thousands of families were turned out of their homes, deported, tortured, raped, killed. Over a three year period, more than 1.5 million people died. Every family of Armenian descent in the world has been touched by this tragedy.

I tell this story because it needs to be told. I tell this story as the offspring of a survivor, because it is my responsibility to my lost relatives. I tell this story because we need to be aware of one another’s history, and only in recognition can we work to prevent future genocidal violence. And I tell you this story because my forebears, and many others like them in different situations, in Germany, in Cambodia, Rwanda, and hosts of other places have understood that following the Good Shepherd means walking the way of the cross. And that the Good Shepherd’s flock is formed of all the peoples and nations and ethnicities of the earth.

And I tell this story because we all need be reminded that the Good Shepherd is our savior. It is his job to save us, and it is our job, to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ Jesus. That by how we live and love, we show forth our commitment “in truth and action”, as the Epistle says. That we witness to God’s saving action in Jesus the Christ by our words and witness to his deeds in our own lives.

Helder Camara, the late Brazilian archbishop and faithful witness to the Gospel in the 20th century, reminded us time and again that each of us needs to proclaim by the lives we live that God loves each and every person. That God’s love extends beyond our wildest imaginations. And that we most probably will be confronted and challenged whenever we speak up for the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters. His famous statement still rings true. “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. But when I ask why there are poor, they call me a Communist.”

The Good Shepherd counts on you and me to proclaim his Good News and show his saving grace to the world. By word and deed. By our actions and witness. Certainly it is not easy. And never has been. But however we can do it, we must. AMEN.