

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 6-7, 2017
John 10:1-10

“Shepherd Guardian”

It’s the first weekend in May, and that means ‘tis the season for the release of a new superhero movie. Pastor Campbell is the resident expert on such things, but yours truly is venturing forth into this territory. With all the tension, anxiety, and fear that seems to be everywhere in the world today, I think we’re really ready for a superhero! The release this weekend of “Guardians of the Galaxy – Vol. 2” follows the release of “Guardians of the Galaxy – Vol. 1” three years ago in 2014. This is an American superhero film based on the Marvel Comics superhero team by the same name (Guardians of the Galaxy). This is now the tenth Marvel Comics superhero movie, and it revolves around the central character, Peter Quill, (“Star Lord”) who in Vol. 1 “forms an uneasy alliance with a group of extraterrestrial misfits who are fleeing after stealing a powerful artifact” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guardians_of_the_Galaxy_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guardians_of_the_Galaxy_(film))). Now “Guardians of the Galaxy – Vol. 2” “continues the team's adventures as they traverse the outer reaches of the cosmos. The Guardians must fight to keep their newfound family together as they unravel the mystery of Peter Quill's true parentage” (https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/guardians_of_the_galaxy_vol_2). It’s that word “guardian” from “Guardians of the Galaxy” that connects us to what’s happening in worship today on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday. And so the message for today, rising up out of Jesus’ words in the Gospel lesson, is entitled, “Shepherd Guardian.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is often called “Good Shepherd Sunday,” and for good reason. The Scripture lessons, the music and hymns, the sermon, the prayers – everything on this day revolves around that beloved image of our crucified and risen Savior who is our Good Shepherd. Though we live in a place that is far removed from sheep and shepherding, that image of Jesus our Good Shepherd, our Shepherd Guardian, is near and dear to our hearts. And why is that? Even in the fast-paced, densely populated, urban-suburban location that we call home, maybe deep within us there remains this deep-seated desire for a superhero; for someone who can step in, rescue us, and save the day. Though he may not wear a mask or a cape, Jesus is that Someone, who has stepped in to rescue and redeem us. And he did this not with a laser gun or some futuristic high tech weapon. He did this by the shedding of his precious blood when he took our place and died the death we rightly deserved because of our sin and disobedience. Jesus describes the work of our enemy: “**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy...**” (John 10:10a). In every superhero movie, that’s exactly what the enemy does, right? Except what we’re talking about isn’t just a movie; it’s for real. And our enemy isn’t playing a game here; it’s for keeps. Jesus, true God and true man, our Shepherd Guardian, is the One who has come to destroy the power of the enemy. Jesus is the One who has laid down his life for the sake of his sheep (John 10:15), as he tells us: “**I came that they may have life and have it abundantly**” (John 10:10b). When all is said and done, isn’t that what we all want: full and abundant life? Not life that is just some meaningless existence with no purpose and then we die. No, Jesus came to give to us all full and abundant life. He died for us that we might live for him.

In the ever-expanding world of technology, voice recognition is a tool that we almost take for granted with our smart phones and other devices. They respond to our instructions and requests. Jesus talks about voice recognition in today’s Gospel lesson: “**But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name**

and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (John 10:2-4). Here the tables are turned: it’s not so much about Jesus responding to our instructions and requests, but our responding to his instructions and requests. Or rather, it is because Jesus has responded to our urgent request to rescue and redeem us by laying down his life for us that we now have been set free to follow him – not under fear or compulsion, but willingly and gladly. If this Shepherd Guardian laid down his life for us, doesn’t it stand to reason that he really has our best interests at heart? And so we can respond to him, we can follow him, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4), because we know his voice, and it is a voice of love.

That word “guardian” is found in today’s Epistle lesson (1 Peter 2:19-25), where the apostle Peter tells us: **“For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and [Guardian] of your souls.”** The English Standard Version (ESV) is the translation of Scripture that we use in worship, and it actually uses the word “Overseer,” which is accurate. But I have substituted the word “Guardian” for “Overseer.” The original word here is ἐπίσκοπος, where we get our word “episcopal,” which means overseer, guardian, or bishop. In worship on Good Friday, we heard those convicting and sobering words from Isaiah 53: **“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all”** (Isaiah 53:6). That is truth; we have all turned aside from the Lord. But Good Friday must give way to Easter, and death must give way to life. In Jesus, there is hope for us all. If we’re serious about having a Guardian of our Galaxy, we need look no further than our Shepherd Guardian, Jesus.

This year, Good Shepherd Sunday coincides with Confirmation Sunday as young men and women reaffirm their Baptismal vows in the Rite of Confirmation. They will publicly profess their faith in Jesus our Good Shepherd, just as so many of us have done in our own lives. This is a significant faith milestone for these young people, their families, but also our whole congregation. It affords each of us the opportunity to come alongside these younger brothers and sisters to encourage and bless them in their following of him who is our Shepherd Guardian. May the Lord strengthen us to do this today, tomorrow, and all the days to come.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.