

## **EASTER: A TIME TO REJOICE IN HOPE**

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**May 3, 2009**

**Acts 4:5-12**

**Psalm 23**

**1 John 3:16-24**

**John 10:11-18**

### **Easter...So What?**

In the church calendar, space is reserved for Easter's aftermath, so that the question "so what?" can be explored. In various ways, each of the Scripture texts above addresses that question, though none plumbs the depths fully. In Acts, the event of the crucifixion and resurrection, viewed through the lens of an Old Testament prophecy (Psalm 118:22), is decisive for explaining salvation (Acts 4:10-12). 1 John adopts the sacrificial death of Jesus, which we remember on Good Friday, as the model for Christian love. Psalm 23, though far in advance of the passion of the Messiah, nevertheless gives a shepherd-shape to the purpose of Jesus' death as it anticipates God's healing presence in the undoing of death.

A unique feature of the Fourth Gospel is the Evangelist's habit of understanding the episodes of the life and ministry of Jesus, with their conclusion in the Easter events, as enactments of Jesus' climactic glorification in death and resurrection. It is a puzzle to us that the horrors of crucifixion could be categorized in terms of glory, but when one understands that God revealed himself precisely in this moment of utter human impotence and shame as dying for the world, "glorification" becomes a sensible descriptor (John 12:23; 21:19).

In John 10:11-18, the Evangelist presents Jesus in prophetic mode, having assumed the role of the shepherd with responsibility towards his "sheep." This responsibility—to care for them, feed them, and protect them—is epitomized in the shepherd's willingness to risk his life for the flock. Jesus alludes to his death but also interprets the meaning of that death. His willingness to risk death signifies his authenticity—he is the good shepherd, not merely the hired hand (vv.11-13). His willingness to die is grounded in the intimate relationship between him and his sheep (v.14). And his willingness to suffer death is grounded in God's love (v.17).

While this sequence occurs ahead of Jesus' death on the cross, it serves well to address that question prompted by the Easter events—so what? Jesus' death was not a sad ending to a futile struggle with powers too great to overcome. He chose to die and did so intending to take that life up again (v.18). His death was for the sheep, and his resurrection life is equally for them—for us. A glimpse at the later Johannine writing (1 John 3:16-24) reveals that the "so what?" of Easter is meant to shape the lives of all believers.

Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for others became a pattern for Christian sacrificial living. We can sacrifice for others because Jesus' resurrection has redefined the meaning of life by putting the meaning of death into proper perspective. Since human death is not the end, it need not limit the extent to which we share our possessions and give our very selves for others in need.

The outcome of Easter merely began with Jesus' resurrection and appearances. It finds its full meaning only when human life is lived differently—for God and for others—because of Easter.

The Reflection for this week was prepared by Philip H. Towner, Ph.D, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Dean of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

+ + +

**This week remember to pray for the work of the United Bible Societies and for Bible work in our own country and around the world. Bibles Societies observe May 9 each year as their special day of prayer. The following prayer is offered as a guide for prayer throughout the week:**

O Lord, we thank you today for the work of the Fellowship of Bible Societies all over the world, and we thank you for calling us to play a part in this work.

Bless, Lord, and protect each national Bible Society: watch over the staff and board members, give them energy and vision for their work, and renew their sense of mission.

Bless, Lord, and protect all those who work to make your Word available and understood in new languages and to new audiences: Bible translators, those who check and review translations, typesetters, publishers and printers, and all who seek innovative ways to distribute the Scriptures.

Bless, Lord, and protect all those who through their efforts and contributions help to fund the work of the Bible Societies: donors, fundraisers and supporting churches.

Bless, Lord, and protect the staff of the Service Organization, and help them to support the work of the Fellowship with skill and dedication.

Enable all who work in the Bible Society movement to serve you with joy and enthusiasm and to live as true servants of your Word.

For you are a merciful God who loves humanity and all your Creation, and to you we give glory in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

**Activity Corner:** “Good Shepherd” Poster and Meditative Prayer

Supplies needed: Bible; poster board; markers; crayons; old magazines; scissors; glue or paste; 3” x 5” index cards; pens or pencils.

Read Psalm 23 and create a poster that illustrates this psalm. Across the top write THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD. Invite members of your household to look for pastoral scenes from magazines or to illustrate various verses from Psalm 23. Members of your household may wish to create their own individual drawings based on the psalm. Display

the poster or the drawings throughout the week where you gather for family devotions as a reminder that Jesus is our Good Shepherd who watches over us every day.

Psalm 23 expresses the assurance of God's protection, goodness, and mercy. Distribute 6 index cards to each member of your household. Ask them to copy each one of the six verses from Psalm 23 (one verse per card). Beginning with verse 1 on Monday, and continuing through to verse 6 on Saturday, invite members of your household to read and meditate on the assigned verse each day and, on the back of each card, to write down their thoughts. Encourage them to conclude their daily meditation with prayer.