

Sermon *The Purpose of Life: Being a Living Icon to the World*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 4.21.24

Welcome to Good Shepherd Sunday which always falls on the 4th Sunday after Easter. I'd like to start today with a complaint (sheep complain after all, so why not). There are some churches in the great Christian tradition that celebrate Christmas with this belief: Jesus was born to be a sacrifice for us. They believe the Christmas joy centers around his being born to be a sacrifice. I disagree – not with the reason why he was born but for their timing. God so loved the world that he sent his only son. He was born as the incarnation, the God-is-with-us, the savior of the whole world. Let's rejoice in his birth at Christmas and save the sacrificial aspect of Jesus' life for the season of Lent and Easter. In fact, that's what we have today on this 4th Sunday of Easter. Jesus said: I am the Good Shepherd; I will lay down my life for the sheep and I will pick my life back up. That's sacrificial living – sacrificing for the sheep (which are the traditional sacrificial animals). And; and I will pick my life back up again.

Regardless of how you see Jesus, he knows what his purpose is. His purpose is to be the Good Shepherd – to call his sheep each by name, they will hear and respond to his voice, he will lay down his life for the sheep and he will pick his life up again. That's his purpose. He's the Good Shepherd so there will be one flock, there will be one shepherd, and, he has sheep that don't belong to this fold, he'll go get them to so there will be one flock! That's his purpose; he knows it, he shares it and he lives it. He lives his purpose so well that not even death can stop him. Death just became a pause for him, not an ending. And, for those who he redeems and calls, death for us too is just a pause and not an ending but the gateway to eternal life. Let the church say amen to that! This is why we call him Lord and Savior – he came here for all of this. It's his purpose. His purpose is what makes us worthy to stand before him.

Let me ask you a question: what is your purpose? Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows his purpose. What is yours? Sheep serve a purpose. Historically speaking, the primary purpose is the production of wool. Secondly is milk. Lastly is for meat. What is your purpose?

English used to use purpose as a verb. Here's a sentence: I purpose to go to the grocery store. I purpose to get my car fixed today. Purpose as a verb in English happened before the invention of cars so I suppose the sentence would be, I purpose to get my mule fixed today. But you get the point. Here in the south, you'll hear some people use the word "fixin" like purpose was used back then – I'm fixin' on getting my car fixed today. Jesus' purpose was to love, to forgive, to sacrifice and to restore. What is your purpose?

CBS Mornings has a weekly segment called Kindness 101 featuring Steve Hartman and his two children. They introduce a word and then report on a story about the word. It sounds elementary but it is profound, moving and deep. This past Friday, they did a story on purpose. It was about an 82 year old man named Dan. He buried his wife, Ann, and lost his sense of purpose. As the days went by, he sunk deeper into depression. He started wondering what the point of life was. Six months after she died, he was shopping in a Publix. In the canned food section, he had a grimacing look on his face. He didn't like grocery shopping and he didn't like being alive without Ann. Then, without warning, a shopping cart – the kind that is decorated to look like a

green race car – crossed in front of him. Nora, a four-year old girl with straight blond hair was seated in it. She waved at Dan and said, “Hi old person, my name is Nora, today is my birthday, you need to give me a hug.” They both stopped. Nora’s mother pulled out her phone and took some pictures. She’s never seen Nora act this way before. It was like she had known Dan all her life and was happy to see him – and insisting that he give her a hug.

CBS news was able to get the security footage from Publix and it shows clearly that Nora’s shopping cart passed in front of Dan, he looked unhappy, she waved, they both stopped and talked.

Nora finally did get that hug. And her mother took a picture of it. They eventually exchanged information and for the next four years Nora visited Dan on most Sunday afternoons. He had grandchildren who were grown and living elsewhere. She has grandparents but this relationship was different. It was special. Nora’s mom has a picture of Nora sleeping with the framed picture of when she first met Dan (she would sleep with it when she had trouble falling asleep). Dan reported to Steve Hartman that he suddenly had a purpose again. His purpose was to watch Nora grow up. He also said that Nora reminded him that he has love in his heart to give. She helped him get out of the hole of grief that he had placed himself into and to love again. One last thing, Dan said he now believes in angels because he knows one – Nora.

Dan passed away four years ago. But, his memory is still fresh with Nora. His last years were spent living with purpose and with love, all thanks to Nora and her request: Hi old person, it’s my birthday, you need to give me a hug.

What is your purpose?

We do use purpose nowadays as a verb, it is called repurposing. When we take something that is discarded or broken, we can change it and repurpose it into something useful. It’s an adaptation of something into something new with a new purpose. Humans seem to be constantly in a state of repurposing. Our first purpose was to draw a breath, and then to eat, and then to sit up, crawl and then walk. We go to school for what purpose – to get a job. We then date and many get married. That gives us a new purpose. Some have kids – that’s repurposing – and then we help them with their purpose in life – to breathe, to eat, crawl walk, etc. Then they move out. Sigh. And we get to repurpose again. Jesus knew what his purpose is. We, sheep, get to rediscover what our purpose is because it seems to change over time.

There is one purpose that holds all Christians together. We reaffirm our purpose when we renew our baptismal covenant, like what we did on Easter Sunday this year. It is spelled out for us on page 304 in the Book of Common Prayer. You’ll see two questions at the bottom of the page and three more on the top of the next page. Let’s read them and listen for our purpose.

“Will you continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?”

The apostles taught us that our primary purpose is to give thanks to God in all times and in all places. Our purpose is to praise God and to give thanks. St. Paul wrote: Rejoice in the Lord

always again I say rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always again I say rejoice. Rejoice. Rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always. If some of you had a song in your head when I said that it is because not only is it a hymn, but many believe Paul was quoting a hymn from the early Church. The primary purpose of the follower of the Great Shepherd is to rejoice and give thanks in all times and in places. That is their teaching, that is their fellowship. And we participate with them now in their teaching, in the fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers. This is our purpose!

The questions go on. Our purpose is to resist evil. Our purpose is to proclaim by word, and most importantly, by example, the Good News of God in Christ. Nora raised up her hand and her voice and proclaimed good news to Dan – it's her birthday and he needs to give her a hug. Our purpose is to seek and serve Christ in all persons loving our neighbor as ourselves. And, our purpose of the flock of the Great Shepherd is to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being. This is our mutual calling and our shared purpose. No matter where you are in life, how deep of a hole of depressing you find yourself in, our purpose remains to give thanks, to have fellowship, in the prayers and in resisting evil, and loving our neighbors as best we can and respecting the dignity of everyone. That's our purpose.

One more thing. Today is a special day at All Angels. We have had an icon commissioned for us by Alan and Paula. It is displayed on the wall and will be blessed soon. Icons are living art showing us the visible side of Scripture. The commissioned icon we have is of Michael and Gabriel – the two archangels. They are invisible to us until by God's command they make themselves known. They bring Good News, they bring protection, wisdom, and peace. It is their purpose to do so. The purpose of an icon is to show us, through art, of the Word of God, of protection, wisdom and peace.

Our purpose is to continue in the teaching, fellowship, breaking/sharing of bread and in the prayers. Our purpose, in other words, is to be a living icon of God's purpose on this planet. We are icons of peace, unity and joy in a depressed, angry and divided nation. Our purpose is to resist becoming divided and angry. Our iconic purpose is to love our neighbors as Christ love and forgave us. Our iconic purpose is to respect the dignity of every human being. That is our purpose, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.