

Fourth Weekend of Easter (RCL/A): "The Good Shepherd, a Thai Soccer Team, and Us"
John 10:1-10
April 29-30, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

If you haven't seen *13 Lives*, Ron Howard's movie about the 2018 rescue of a Thai youth soccer team stranded in a flooded cave for almost 3 weeks, I recommend it highly. Pastor Mark & I watched it this past week. Knowing that we were approaching this Good Shepherd weekend, I thought, "My, our **Good** Shepherd sent a a lot of **human** shepherds to care for those boys!"

The kids had just played a game, and wanted to spelunk, to explore a nearby cave, before dinner. As they jumped on their bikes, their coach, 25-year-old Ekkapol Chantawong, said he'd go along. Thank Heaven! While the team was in the cave, a monsoon rain came unexpectedly early, flooded the entrance, and drove the youth deep within. When the kids were no-shows for dinner and their families figured out where they'd gone and what must have happened, they called the authorities. Thai Navy Seal divers arrived on the scene and determined that an underwater rescue was the only option, because tunnels were completely submerged. They attempted to reach the youth, but had to turn back because of the difficulty of the rescue. Even the most experienced divers were in danger of drowning in the labyrinth of cave tunnels, made more treacherous by rushing water, narrow spaces with sharp edges, profound darkness, and a really long way to where the boys were sheltering deep inside the mountain.

The movie shows something I didn't read about when the rescue occurred 5 years ago. The mountain is called The Sleeping Princess because that's what its contours look like. At the cave entrance there's a statue of a reclining woman, the image of a goddess. The local people feared they had angered her and that is why their children were trapped.

So they left offerings to apologize, to placate, to beg her to release the children. In the movie a Buddhist religious leader comes with a coterie of monks, special prayers are prayed, incense is burned, more offerings are left. This spiritually comforts the families.

Meanwhile, the team inside the cave is meditating, day in, day out, as water runs out and they have to lick moisture from the cave wall, as food runs out and they start to shed pounds, as they sit for spells in darkness so the batteries in their flashlights won't give out. Most of these kids look like pre-teens in the movie. The one who calms, encourages and shepherds them is their coach.

The movie tells us that Ekkapol Chantawong was part of an ethnic minority and came from neighboring Myanmar. What it doesn't tell us is that he was orphaned as a child. As other destitute orphans frequently do in that corner of the world, he entered a Buddhist monastery in Thailand, where he was a monk for nearly a decade. One of his jobs was taking care of the younger novices, which prepared him well to be mother hen of his little brood marooned a mile underground in the cave. He taught the boys how to meditate as a way to minimize stress, push back their fears and wait patiently for rescue in terrible circumstances. Mr. Ekkapol stopped being a monk but still worked at the monastery as a custodian. A monk who knew him said that his teaching the boys to meditate "helped save their lives."¹

The week after the rescue, the deputy commander of Thailand's Third Army had this to say about the rescue of 12 young soccer players and the coach of their "Wild Boar" team from the Tham Luang Cave:

The most important piece of the rescue was good luck. So many things could have gone wrong, but somehow we managed to get the boys out.²

Good luck?? Folks here in Manasquan, at Holy Trinity had been telling me how frequently and passionately they'd prayed for the survival of the boys and the safety of the rescuers. From our perspective, divine providence, God's grace, heavenly answer to prayers raised up around the world explain the successful rescue, not generic "good luck"! The prayers ascended from all corners of the globe and were addressed to God in a variety of ways, voiced by the faithful of **all** religions. Whether addressed as God, Jesus, Adonai, Allah, the Great Spirit, Buddha or any other name, the same Divine One hears our cries.

A Thai Navy SEAL, one of the last people out of the cave before it flooded shortly after the last leg of the rescue was complete, wore a Buddha amulet around his neck for the entire mission. He was in agreement with many other Buddhist divers and local residents, believing that the final flood was divinely held off until the last evacuee had reached safety:

"The cave is sacred," he said. "It was protected until the very end."³

It was God's grace, channeled through international cooperation, that saved the 13 members of that Thai soccer team. You've probably read or heard some of these statistics:

- 5,000 people contributed to the rescue in 1 way or another, including 2,000 soldiers and 200 divers, as well as representatives of 100 government agencies from 17 countries.

We Americans helped with logistics; the British provided some of the most experienced cave divers, along with Australia, China, Finland and the U.S. Over the course of the rescue enough water was pumped out of the cave to fill 400 Olympic swimming pools, so much that neighboring fields were flooded. One woman who'd been preparing to plant her rice crop before her field became inundated refused to apply for government reimbursement of her lost income, saying the government had other important aspects of the rescue to pay for, and the boys' safe return was the only compensation she wished:

“I am more than willing to have my rice fields flooded as long as the children are safe,” she said. “The boys are like my children.”³

She shepherded the boys in her own way, from afar, with her own personal sacrifice.

Mr. Ekkapol was considered “stateless” – a man without a country. No country claimed him because he belongs to an ethnic minority from Myanmar. However, he and 3 of the “stateless” youth received Thai citizenship after the rescue. One was the 14-year-old who served as interpreter for the British divers who discovered the kids deep inside the cave. Adul Sam-on is part of yet another ethnic minority, a tribe descended from headhunters! He was always at the head of his class and speaks 5 languages. When he was 6 years old his illiterate parents smuggled him from Myanmar into Thailand in the hopes he could gain the education that would save him from the life of poverty they faced and also so he would escape the fate of becoming a child warrior in a guerrilla group. His parents dropped him off at a Baptist church and pled with the pastor for his safekeeping. In the school Adul attended, 20% of the students were citizens of no country, like him, and half the students were part of ethnic minorities. The principal commented, “Stateless children have a fighting spirit that makes them want to excel... Adul is the best of the best”⁵ – and God put Adul just where he needed to be, to serve as a communication lifeline.

We know that there was 1 life lost during the rescue operation: that of a retired Thai Navy SEAL, Saman Gunan, who had volunteered as a diver and died deep in the bowels of the cave. It wasn’t just international cooperation and coordination on high levels that helped to bring about the miracle. It was also the self-sacrifice and incredible bravery of individuals, human shepherds. The rescue had its cost -- including the life of Saman Gunan and another diver who died later of an infection contracted during the rescue efforts.

This weekend we hear our Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, describe Himself as “the gate” for the sheepfold:

“Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:9-10)

When we were powerless to save ourselves, our Lord Jesus, both Good Shepherd and Lamb of God, paid the price of our sins, lifted us up out of the grave into a resurrected life. It’s in Holy Baptism that we come to share in the blessings that flow from His suffering, death and resurrection. This weekend John dies and rises in the waters of Baptism. He will be sealed with fragrant oil as the cross is traced on his forehead. In the olden days, when a package was sent it was sealed with wax, stamped with an imprint showing ownership. John will be stamped with Christ’s cross, set apart for Christ, marked as Christ’s own. Karl Barth wrote that we aren’t sealed just for a moment but for a lifetime. The sealing is “a continuous flow of strength from God to man – the perpetual or ever new giving of strength, wisdom, courage, joy, and the right words...It enables the saints to do things they would not do of their own resources....” We are all part of the Body of Christ and the much larger family of God, who petitioned God from all corners of the globe for a baker’s dozen of players from the Wild Boar soccer team. Many human shepherds channeled the Good Shepherd’s love. May we, as well. Amen

¹Hannah Beech, “Poor, Stateless and Used to Beating Long Odds,” *NY Times* (July 11, 2018, A1 & A8), A8.

²Hannah Beach, Richard C. Paddock and Muktita Suhartono, “Intricate Rescue: ‘I Still Can’t Believe It Worked,’” *NY Times* (July 13, 2018, pp. A1 & A10), A10.

³Ibid.

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