

## Sermon for May 3, 2020 – “Good Sheep”

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A – Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-12, 14-16a; Psalm 23; John 10:1-18

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A devout old shepherd lost his favorite Bible while he was out looking for a wayward lamb. Three weeks later a sheep walked up to him carrying the Bible in its mouth. The shepherd couldn't believe his eyes. He took the precious book out of the sheep's mouth raised his eyes heavenward and exclaimed "It's a miracle!" "Not really," said the sheep. "Your name is written inside the cover."

There's no shortage of Bible verses about shepherds. Images of God as shepherd can be found throughout Scripture. In Isaiah we find, "**He will feed His flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in His arms and carry them in His bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.**" (40:11) In the Psalms we find numerous such references, "**We your people and the sheep of your pasture will give thanks to you forever to all generations we will tell of your praise.**" (Psalm 79:13) We're reminded that "**...he is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.**" (Ps 95:7) We are reminded there to "**...know that the Lord Himself is God. It is He who has made us and not we ourselves ...we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.**" (Ps 100:3) Then – of course – there are this morning's reading. Truth is I'm really just scratching the surface. As a matter of fact, shepherds, sheep, or lambs are mentioned some 420 times in the Bible.

It's powerful imagery and well over 3,000 years later (since OT times) it is **familiar** imagery. And even now far away from the fields and pastures of first century Palestine, far away from the shepherds and sheep of which Jesus spoke the image resonates with us still. The promise of a shepherd who is with us in the valley of the shadow of death, the shepherd who searches for the lost one in the ninety-nine, the shepherd who guards the gate. Somehow, most of us know what it is to be gathered in and cared for, protected, and loved, or at the very least—we like the idea.

Of course, sheep rearing today is very different from that which took place in Jesus' time. Most sheep in biblical times were not raised to be eaten as they are today, but for wool. This meant that the shepherd had a long, caring relationship with them which usually lasted a natural lifespan. When shepherds came to town for supplies they'd put their sheep in pens guarded by a gatekeeper. After purchasing supplies they would return to the pen and call their sheep. The sheep knew their shepherd and would follow him/her out to pasture again. Once out in the wild shepherds would gather bushes and rocks to build temporary pens at night. In the opening, the shepherds would sleep using their own body as gate. This way, predators had to step over them to get to the sheep.

For the disciples shepherds would have been commonplace, and the image of God as Shepherd was familiar. The psalms would have been well known by most people in Jesus day. They would be familiar with the shepherd references there, some of which I read earlier. The image of God as the Good Shepherd would have resonated as much for them as they do for us. But—I think—for **different** reasons and this is what I want to talk a bit about today.

You see—for nearly 2,000 years (since the time of Christ) Christians have recognized God as a shepherd and, of course, Jesus as the **Good** Shepherd. We have called the church the sheepfold and we've called ourselves the sheep. We love the comforting image. We want the Twenty-third Psalm read at our funerals. For many, the image of Christ the Shepherd evokes the image of green rolling pastures and a quiet bucolic countryside free of care and worries. Jesus the Christ is seen as the one who shelters us and offers us respite, comfort, and security, keeping us safe from the troubles of life. He is the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, very much like the lambs in his care. But there's more to this than most of us realize. Trouble is, however, attractive this image is to us, this image of Christ the Shepherd fails to capture the biblical imagery which Jesus calls up in our gospel reading. The image of a shepherd is, biblically speaking, coded language. It is a metaphor not simply for the gentle presider of a carefree respite from the troubles of life but for the leadership of the people of God. The ideal of the Good Shepherd was often contrasted with the reality of bad shepherds; the priests, the prophets and kings and leaders of the Israelites who repeatedly missed the mark. Those who endangered the flock and mislead the people of God into dark and dangerous situations. But over and over in the Old Testament we hear, especially during the period of the Exile, that not only would God give Israel **good** shepherds to lead them He told them that He Himself would become the Good Shepherd. No longer will the Israelites languish under thrall of wicked or incompetent kings, false prophets, and double-dealing priests. Instead, God Himself would come and lead His people as priest, prophet, and king. The Lord will be their shepherd; the people "shall not want."

In our gospel reading Jesus testifies that this vision is fulfilled in **Him**. **He** is God the Good Shepherd. **He** holds the "three-fold office" as it's known in Reformed Theology of priest, prophet, and king. So, Christ's testimony to being the Good Shepherd isn't simply poetic musing but a practical statement of God's response to real-world concerns.

All of this comes at a time when the Jews were ruled by the Herodian kings who themselves were controlled by a foreign power, namely the Romans. What's more, all this corruption was supported by the Temple priests and most of the Pharisees who were in the Romans thrall and just as corrupt. This is why the context of our gospel reading was so important.

You see, Jesus was speaking to the very people that were threatening His flock calling them thieves, bandits, and wolves while they were standing right in front of Him! No wonder they called Him a demon. No wonder they wanted Him dead.

So, what this all means is that the words of Jesus, that He is the Good Shepherd, would have been heard as an answer to the desperate prayers of the Jews. Cries for God to act as He had done in the past freeing them from bondage in Egypt at the time of the Exodus or returning them from Babylon and rebuilding the Temple at the time of the Exile. The people longed for God to deal with the Herods and the Romans and everyone colluding with them as God had dealt with Pharaoh and the Babylonians.

So, here brothers and sisters is the thing, Christ isn't inviting us to lose ourselves in thoughts of a carefree existence beyond the trials/tribulations of this world.

Unfortunately, they will remain and as we talked about a few weeks ago, we will have scars to remind us. But Jesus understands us sheep. He knows that sheep have strong herding/following instincts. He knows that when one sheep moves the rest will often follow even if it doesn't seem to be a good idea. He knows how often we stray and fall prey to the hired hands who neither know the sheep nor care for them; likewise, the thieves who come to steal and kill and destroy, the wolves that snatch and scatter them. Jesus is telling us that He's come into the world, the **real** world, to deal with the capriciousness and cruelty of men and women like Herod or Caesar, those who collude with them, worldly priests and false prophets and their modern-day counterparts. But most importantly the Risen Christ has come to stand over and against the powers that undergird tyrants and human corruption. Those beyond mere human agents. Those darker powers of sin and death that threaten to deprive us of the abundant life that God intends for His people. And the Good Shepherd, God in Christ, will face these dark powers down directly. He will not run from them. He will tell them that if they want to get to **us** they are going to have to go through **Him**. He **is** the gate and the battle has, in fact and reality, already been won. **That** is the power of the cross. **That** is the message of the empty tomb.

When we settle for an image of Christ that's limited to reassurance and comfort, we risk that image becoming an idol—big time. This idol hems in the risk and danger of following Christ and so whatever we gain in safety and security we lose in terms of reality and purpose. The end result are people, and (far too often) churches that retreat in the face of threats, that pursues accommodation in the face of corruption that is more **of** the world than **in** the world instead of bearing witness to a unique way of life. At the end of the day this unique way of life, this life of faith, is about relationship. The sheep obey the shepherd not because they're stupid, not because they've been trained the right way, but because they know the shepherd's voice and they trust the shepherd. Their faith is based on the relationship.

We follow Jesus not because we are stupid, not because we've been trained the right way but because we know **His** voice. We trust **HIM**. Thus, our faith is based not on **religion** but on **relationship**, relationship with **Him**—with our shepherd. And it is in that context of relationship that Jesus, the **Good** Shepherd, becomes—for us—the gate, the gate that opens to still waters and green pastures, the gate to new life.

We walk through it even though we don't have it all figured out because we trust in Jesus. We know He's worth trusting even when we're not sure where the path is heading. Even when it runs through the valley of the shadow of death.

Christ is Risen.

Christ is Risen indeed.

Thanks be to God our Shepherd.

Amen and amen.