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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2021

Lectionary Year B: John 10:11-18

Of all the characters on the classic television series M*A*S*H, no one, with the exception of Fort Wayne's own Frank Burns, deservedly received as much ridicule as Colonel Flagg. Fans of the show will remember Colonel Flagg as the ultra-gung ho -- and ultra incompetent -- intelligence officer who occasionally visited the 4077th on missions of dubious merit. No one seemed more out of touch with reality than Colonel Flagg; his farfetched explanations for relatively ordinary occurrences and the way he took himself and his work so seriously (despite not being very bright) offered M*A*S*H and its writers a lot of material that could've written itself!

One of Colonel Flagg's attributes that stood out was his gift for making grandiose and nonsensical pronouncements about himself. He once declared, "I am the wind," and, minutes later, threw himself out the window of Colonel Potter's office, and apparently didn't land on his feet. Peering out the now-broken window, Hawkeye looks down at Colonel Flagg and quips, "The wind just broke its leg!"

As to what Colonel Flagg meant when he declared "I am the wind," that's anyone's guess. Did he really think he was so elusive and mysterious that he could, among other things, escape detection and capture? Or was he merely trying to create an aura of wonder

around himself and didn't know what he was talking about at all? The latter would be my guess.

Most of the time, when people refer to themselves with obtuse "I am" metaphors, we tend to regard them as pretentious, if not downright silly. Would anyone take seriously the buffoonish Colonel Flagg when he declares, "I am the wind"? It's safe to say that not too many people can get away with lofty "I am" references to themselves. Our Lord Jesus Christ, however, is one of the few exceptions. One can see, in the Gospel of John, that the parables so central to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are non-existent in John. In lieu of parables, John offers metaphors in the form of "I am" statements, with today's example being "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11a).

Among the other well-known "I am" sayings in John are "I am the bread of life" (6:35), "I am the light of the world" (8:12; 9:5), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25-26), and "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). From the Old Testament you may recall when Moses saw the burning bush, and God declared, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). One could liken this to a statement like "God is God," which helps define God's being as infinite and eternal. And, in the "I am" sayings, Jesus echoes God's own declaration at the burning bush. It's an identity connected to God's identity of "I AM WHO I AM." God the Father is the "I AM," and Jesus the Son is also the "I AM."

The good shepherd metaphor in the Gospel of John has Old Testament roots, as well. In Ezekiel, chapter 34, we can find a com-

parison of Israel's "false shepherds" and "true shepherd"; there, it is made clear that Israel, by a series of disobedient kings (or "shepherds") had been led astray. But, if Israel follows its "true shepherd" -- God -- it will be gathered together again and restored. In today's Gospel text, Jesus presents himself as the fulfillment of the promise put forth in Ezekiel. Jesus will, once and for all, gather together the sheep and restore them to a right relationship with God.

Also similar to the contrast made in Ezekiel, chapter 34 is Jesus' description of the shepherd and the hired hand. Jesus says, "The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away" (John 10:12). Hearing this makes one think of the difference between a business owner and an employee of the business who's just there to punch the clock and collect a paycheck. It is very likely that two completely different levels of commitment are at work here. The owner, if we're following this logic, would be far more inclined to lay down his or her life for the business than the employee who's just there to punch the clock and collect a paycheck. Of course, the comparison Jesus makes could be interpreted as a slight to anyone hired to do a job instead of really owning a business. Similar to what can be found in Ezekiel 34, the shepherd here is the good example while the hired hand is the bad example.

As someone who's spent many months of his life as a hired hand on a farm, I might take exception to this, too! I find Jesus' as-

sertion that "a hired hand does not care for the sheep" (John 10:13b) to be rather bold, to say the least...

Lest we dwell on that too long, though, let us move forward to the positive example that Jesus lifts up; he says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:14-15). Notice how Jesus identifies himself ("I am") and how we are identified. We are, yes, the sheep who live in a relationship with our shepherd because he has gathered us in, and, thereby, we know who he is. Our shepherd calls us by name, and when we hear his voice, we respond in faith towards him.

But sheep often need a little coaxing; remember that they're not terribly intelligent and they can't see very well. Even if a sheep at the front of the herd were to jump off a cliff, the rest would follow because they can't see much farther than what's directly in front of them. You'll notice, too, that a shepherd carries a staff, with a hook on the end; the hook is used to snag the sheep who are straying from the herd, to bring them back into the fold. The most obvious replication of the shepherd's staff in our church is the crozier that the bishop carries. The bishop is the chief pastor of the diocese (pastor being another word for shepherd), and the crozier symbolizes, among other things, the bishop's responsibility for the "flock" that he or she serves.

When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," he offers an image of the care he gives to his flock (which is us) as well as of how

precious each of us is to him. Should one of us happen to stray, the Good Shepherd will do everything he can to bring us back into the fold, as he says, "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15b). This assertion is notable in light of the crucifixion, because it is there where he does precisely that. He laid down his life, freely accepting the death he was to die for the forgiveness of the entire flock...past, present, and future.

Considering the enormous breadth of this flock, it is staggering to think of all who have heard the Good Shepherd's voice and all who continue to hear his voice call them. And the tent just keeps getting bigger, with the addition of succeeding generations who are born into this world and baptized into Christ's Church. Yet the Good Shepherd continues to call all ages and persuasions and colors and classes into a, perhaps, imperfect but still unified whole. Thus, Jesus says, "So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16c). We long for the day when our unified whole becomes less "imperfect" and we'll be able to mutually recognize, for example, the Sacraments of each other's churches, particularly between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

Yet, I truly believe the Good Shepherd will lead us there...

I trust that we will remain faithful to the Good Shepherd's call, as he has been so faithful to us. Indeed, there is nothing we can do to break our bond with him. But for us to hear our Lord's call, a modicum of faith is needed on our part. Being Christ-followers is the fundamental way in which we identify as members

of the Good Shepherd's fold. Think of Jesus saying, "I am," and follow that up by saying, "We are." I am reminded of the Presiding Bishop's words that made it all the way to a bumper sticker: "We are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement." Yes, we are for sure sheep of Jesus' "movement," and, in spite of the unflattering comparison to a not-terribly-bright and nearsighted animal, we belong to someone who cares for us so much that he would lay down his life to ensure that we remain with him.

And yes, maybe it's pretentious when people besides Jesus refer to themselves with "I am" metaphors; naturally, I can't help but think of Colonel Flagg. But, for whatever reason, the pretentiousness quotient goes down considerably when we refer to ourselves with "we are" metaphors. It doesn't hurt to use the lowly sheep in the metaphor, either! But maybe with sheep being not terribly bright -- as well as nearsighted -- we might lose a bit of our arrogance and see how we are dependent on a Shepherd who's infinitely wiser and sharper-visioned than we are. From there, we can entrust ourselves to his fold and be led by him into the eternal communion of "one flock, one shepherd."

We are sheep of Jesus' "movement."

Amen.