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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2022

Lectionary Year C: John 10:22-30

The image of Jesus as "the good shepherd" has become such a part of the Christian vocabulary that it hardly ever gets unpacked. (Pardon my use of a worn-out expression!) As we gather this morning with a substantial amount of shepherd imagery before us, we might need to consider what lies behind this cozy, bucolic portrait from the popular Christian imagination. There may, indeed, be some things out there that we've never considered...

We know why Jesus is referred to as the good shepherd. That is quite clear in our Gospel text. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). There's a shepherd-to-sheep relationship here...one that will never be broken. Furthermore, Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28). The good shepherd cares for his sheep so much that they are under his permanent protection and care. In short, that's the mark of any good shepherd.

Yet, despite today being commonly called "Good Shepherd Sunday," that particular combination of words -- "good" and "shepherd" -- never appears in our Gospel text. One must read the earlier passages of the tenth chapter of John's Gospel to find that exact image. We are, perhaps, led to assume an implied good shepherd motif in today's text. Those of greater scholarly acumen may be better equipped to tackle that matter, but I needn't bother you with such nit-picking in a forum such as this!

What really makes me stop and think is this idea of comparing Christ's followers to sheep in the first place. Sheep aren't terribly smart and often need rather assertive guidance from the shepherd. So, in that light, the comparison of us to sheep isn't particularly flattering. And even the "bright" side of the matter isn't so bright...sheep are, at their best, blindly obedient and incapable of making thoughtful decisions on their own. I'm thinking that, perhaps, Jesus never intended this comparison as a compliment!

And we needn't get into the matter of sheep not smelling very good, either...

Instead of trying to come to definitive and conclusive statements about sheep, let us turn our attention to the shepherd. He is the one with the voice we recognize and he is the one who will keep us unto eternal life. Looked at this way, the sheep's lack of intelligence, inability to make its own decisions, and unpleasant body odor don't seem to matter much anymore. It is the shepherd who matters.

The shepherd matters because he is the only one who can lead us through life's darkest and most difficult passages. When there seems to be no light and only obstacles, it is the shepherd's voice that we can hear and be led to safety and peace of mind, body, and soul.

But the shepherd is not merely the gentle, bearded companion of the world of Christian popular art. He also challenges us to follow him right into life's darkest and most difficult passages in his calling to take up the cross...especially when we may not know where that cross may take us. And yet, if the shepherd calls you to the meanest streets or the darkest alleys, he will still be with you.

But what about the times in which we are simply left clueless...when we are, in fact, not a whole lot different from the none-too-bright actual sheep who roam the pasture? Those of us who aren't experts in geopolitical affairs or military strategy often find ourselves feeling helpless, for example, as we watch what continues to go on in Ukraine.

What we might get, in this case, from common, ordinary sheep is a lesson in humility. It is far too easy to foist our unbridled wrath onto Vladimir Putin (as justified as that might be) when that might not exactly help those "on the ground" in Ukraine who are suffering the most. There are "bad" shepherds, too, who can rouse our tempers and rile up our emotions, but they are, in fact, so crafty that their will might be done instead of the good shepherd's will. Let us not use the name of Jesus to rouse tempers and rile emotions; it wasn't the good shepherd's style, either. He seeks only to be present with his flock in times like these, and he calls out to his sheep when they long for guidance and security.

And a righteous judge will do the work that the good shepherd didn't do...

The good shepherd's flock will recognize his voice when they seek real justice instead of mere retribution. They will recognize his voice when they start asking questions instead of pretending to have all the answers. They will recognize his voice when they are moved from idle contemplation to constructive action. Martin Luther, once a favorite religious reformer of mine, envisioned as one of the means of the Gospel something he called "mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren," which, in its broadest sense, encompasses everyone from Ukraine to Warsaw, Indiana and everywhere in between. So

as we think of how we recognize the shepherd's voice, may our response to his call include conversation with and consolation of suffering and grieving people -- through whatever means possible -- in Ukraine and anywhere else people are suffering and grieving. We may not be able to hop on a plane to Ukraine tomorrow, but we can always be local agents of God's global grace.

And yes, the shepherd may occasionally yank a little too firmly with his staff, but we are not animals, so there's no calling the ASPCA. Often, this may be just the sort of correction that we need. Any good shepherd wants to keep all his sheep in the fold...and sometimes the ones that stray might feel the firm pull of his staff. That isn't necessarily a bad thing, though; it's just Jesus saying, "Get back here!"

As we celebrate the resurrection in these weeks of Easter, may we remember, too, the treasure that awaits all who are members of the shepherd's flock. As he declares, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (John 10:28a). This is the promise of the resurrection that is the inheritance of all who believe in the crucified and risen one. If the shepherd is leading us anywhere, it is ultimately to eternal life with him.

And let us always remember that the real good shepherd cannot be limited to the imagery of popular Christian art. Jesus is so much more than anything that could possibly be portrayed in a picture. He transcends our expectations, confounds our imaginations, and pours an infinity of grace upon us. Moreover, his is the one voice we can always recognize...even when we cannot understand it. But where understanding fails, faith and trust come to the rescue. They say "yes" in spite of our doubt, cynicism, and uncertainty. And

that is how we are inspired and empowered to follow the good shepherd's lead.

We know that our shepherd is Christ. He cares for us and about us. He feeds us at his table with his precious food and drink. And he leads us to eternal life by virtue of his own life given for lost, straying, and sinful sheep like you and me. With his staff wrapped firmly around our bodies, minds, and souls, we are safe and secure in his care. No one will snatch us out of his hand...not the devil, not the evil powers of this world, and surely not the "bad" shepherds who seek to rouse our tempers and rile up our emotions. Sure, we can convince ourselves that the world has become a pretty awful place, but the good shepherd will yank us back into the fold and call us to make the world a better place.

The good shepherd is more than an image; indeed, he is the substance of the Gospel to us...died and risen for us and guiding us on his path unto eternal life.

Amen.