

Sermon - The Fourth Sunday of Easter
 The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield
 May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

The trouble with Good Shepherd Sunday - and it comes around every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter - the trouble is its quaintness. We recite Psalm 23 - the Billboard Number One of Psalms, and with our heads anointed and our cups running over and goodness and mercy running to catch us, we then hear Jesus referring to himself metaphorically as the Good Shepherd¹, and pious victorian stained glass images of a gentle Jesus with a cuddly little lamb over his shoulders come to mind. And none of that is wrong. Who doesn't want to scoop up a little lamb and cuddle it?

The Good Shepherd and the imagery of him we've inherited is indeed tender and quaint; and it bespeaks a simpler time - a time when humans were more in touch with the natural world - agricultural, pre-industrial, pre-mechanical, nomadic, grazing, verdant. The streams babble and roll gently by, and the green grass, and the hills...

And that's the trouble with Good Shepherd Sunday. Its quaintness.

Sermons enough delve headlong into the behavior of sheep... which is a fraught metaphor for humans in groups, following blindly, dumbly... because whatever we might say of humans, of course, sheep aren't dumb or blind. They're flock animals, prey animals (and so have a strong flight response), for sure and, by virtue of their domestication, are able to be herded by humans - whom they apparently recognize and remember by face. They have a keen sense of smell, and hearing²...

But that's not the point. In the extended discourse from John's Gospel we've read a little piece of today Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, and the trouble is the good Shepherd metaphor isn't really about the sheep, but about the shepherds. That Jesus refers to himself as the *good* Shepherd tells us that he intends to draw a contrast between himself and others - the not-so-good shepherds.

Our reading happens at the very end of that long sequence in the 9th and 10th chapters in which Jesus healed a man born blind on - *of all days* - the Sabbath. The pretentious religious quibblers and potentates are perturbed not only at Jesus, but at the man Jesus healed - and, once they had driven the man away, they go looking for Jesus.³

¹ cf. John 10:11

² <http://www.sheep101.info/flocking.html>

³ John 9:1-34

That's when, face to face, Jesus tells them he's the good Shepherd and spins his sheep-tending image, not so subtly accusing his opponents of being thieves, bandits,⁴ and, well, not good shepherds. Then, for his claim to be one with the Father, they prepare to stone him, but he gets away.⁵

For those listening to Jesus, the whole shepherd metaphor would have called up the words of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel⁶ - words calling to account the religious leaders of the people of Israel who used their influence to abuse and manipulate and oppress and prey on vulnerable people.

There's nothing quaint about this. The prophets' oracles, as well as Jesus' contrast brings up wanting those who would claim to care for people, but who don't see themselves as inherently interdependent with the people. These are the one who only see their flock as a means to an end. We certainly have plenty of those kinds religious figures in our own day -

leaders who sit enriched on the backs of desperate faithful,
institutions that privilege themselves over people,
hierarchies that avert justice for their own,
cowards who hide behind dogmas in justification of their own agendas:
the old boys and backroom dealers and legalists of religion.

But it's not just the easily identified who are on the prowl. No matter how good our intentions, when we find our way into the wrong flock or shepherded by the wrong folks, toward the wrong pastures, each of us is liable to play the wolf if necessity demanded. We can't just point the finger outwards, because, too often, the enemy is us.

And that's why we need Jesus, *The Good Shepherd*. Not more flashy preachers, or gimmicks, or poms; not more rigid rules. We need Jesus, and so does the world. We need the One who cares so much for us he lays down his life,⁷ from whose care no one will snatch us.⁸ The signs of his gracious shepherding are self-giving, life-giving, fidelity, and unity⁹ - the sign is that he is about us.¹⁰

He is about us, and about the health of the whole world. People around us are so scattered and preyed-upon. The sheep are anxious and lonesome and stressed. The not-so-good shepherds have been having a field day, and the wolves, and the thieves and the bandits, too - our neighbors are brutalized and terrified, and left for dead and folks need a shepherd - and it's not going to be this politician or that, this party or that, this preacher or that, even this scientific discovery or that - all of these prove disappointing, because folks need The Good Shepherd - they need Jesus.

⁴ John 10:1

⁵ John 10:31-39

⁶ cf Jeremiah 23 & Ezekiel 34

⁷ John 10:11

⁸ John 10:28

⁹ John 10:11 (I lay down my life); John 10:28 (I give them eternal life); John 10:26 (The works that I do... testify to me); John 10:30 (I and the Father are One)

¹⁰ Self-gift is an essential category of what God is about in Christ Jesus. The gift is that God is about us.

And look - I know that might seem piously pollyanna. But the pastures we're grazing as a world, for all of our capability, aren't working well for us. Because we need Jesus.

Not those who use Jesus for their own sake, but him. That's why, you and I, we need to be focused on the Good Shepherd. More than ever.

So hone in on Jesus' voice, his face, *little flock*, his way. Follow him, only. He and the Father are one - and through him, this Valley of the Shadow of Death will hold no fear at all.

Works Consulted

Taylor, Neil. *The Good Shepherd: An Exegetical Essay of John 10:1-18*. (2016)

Wright IV, William M. *Hearing the Shepherd's Voice: The paroimia of the Good Shepherd Discourse and Augustine's Figural Reading*. *Journal of Theological Interpretation*. (2012)

In the chapel of our oldest Episcopal Seminary, General Seminary in New York, this is the central image - the Chapel of the Good Shepherd - a lovely marble statue of Jesus with his shepherd's staff in one hand, high above the altar, and a newborn lamb cradled in his other arm, like a mother would her child, and the lamb looks up into Jesus' eyes as he looks lovingly down at it - it's a tender image.