

Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10
Psalm 23

The Good Shepherd

The chapel at the General seminary was named for the Good Shepherd and in the center of the wall behind the altar stood an almost life-sized statue of Jesus cradling a small lamb in his arms. This statue brought much comfort to many of us over the years while we were studying there, the chapel being the place where we could pray, cry, plead, despair and even on rarer occasions give thanks for an A grade or two. I was glad of that figure that gave me such comfort, and my guess is that this is the image of the Good Shepherd that we all want to hold in our imaginations.

However, anyone who has known sheep know that they are anything but the image of the spring lambkins gamboling on green pastures. Even as newborns they are feisty, insistent and amazingly strong as I found out when I used to help bottle feed orphaned lambs at my aunt's farm. They also bite; never a good thing to bite the hand of those who are feeding you. For shepherds, sheep and lambs are financial commodities, just as they were in the time of Jesus, and as such demand a level of care pretty much around the clock. They were status symbols, measures of worth and prestige and a walking pantry long before freezers. Shepherds, who appear often in the Bible, are usually young; sheep are strong and heavy, and they carry a crooked staff to grab the wayward sheep around its neck and usually have a dog with them to help manage the sheep as they veer off in unexpected directions. The annual Sheep Trials in England, only marginally less boring than cricket, have teams of shepherds and sheepdogs, competing to round up twenty sheep into a little fold high on the hillside. It takes all day just to get twenty sheep into a little fenced square with a gate in the center. The Shepherds cajole, whistle and shout; the dogs scurry around the sheep, herding them back into a tight flock and eventually all the sheep follow one another into the fold.

Jesus refers to himself as the gate through which the sheep enter the safety of the fold. He tells the disciples that His sheep now his voice and follow him, just as they do in reality. He tells them that other shepherds who have been before him are the enemy and like wolves and foxes, burrowing below fences or jumping them, attempt to get the sheep away from safety; just as we get distracted and lose our way. It is through Jesus, the gate, that we are led into safety; it is through Christ that we are saved we are told.

It was Peter who was charged to feed his sheep by Jesus and today he tells us that we are the sheep who have strayed and who are now saved through the action of Christ. Faith comes with a price we are told; we are to follow, and like Jesus and Peter, that leads to suffering. I confess I don't like this passage in Peter, which begins with an admonition that we need to bear suffering – all suffering- just and unjust alike. It is a passage with a

checkered history that has been used to justify slavery, abuse and torment in ways that we can't accept in our modern day culture. But that too makes it part of the message we must hear today. Slavery, injustice, torture, abuse, oppression are not yet things of the past.. We are each called in our baptismal covenant to resist evil, to bring an end to oppression, to strive for justice, peace and human dignity. It is still a work in progress. Suffering has always been with us and our Lord was no stranger to suffering. That brings its own comfort to many, just as the words of the 23rd psalm never fail to console us in our journeys through the shadow of death, "thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Jesus, our good shepherd walks with us.

The church too makes use of the images of the shepherd. The Bishop carries a staff; the priest is called a pastor whose job it is to lead the flock to spiritual nurture, whose job it is to prepare a table, to feed the flock with the bread and wine of the sacrament, and to walk with them through the valleys of their lives. And here is the special good news here for St Barnabas this morning. As you seek to discern the perfect rector for this flock, this parish, let's not lose sight of the message this morning, either of us. All rectors are temporary shepherds of the flock, because there really is only one Good Shepherd , there really is only one gate and there really is only one savior and that is Jesus Christ. It is Jesus the good shepherd who knows each of us by name and it is His voice that we know and hear and trust; It is Jesus, the good shepherd who will seek us out when we have strayed far away and rejoice when he finds us, even when we have given up looking for him; and it is Jesus, the good shepherd who will pick us up when we are hurt and suffering, when we can't do it alone anymore; and it is Jesus who will cradle us in His arms and bring us safely home. And then our cups will truly runneth over.

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