

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Fourth Sunday of Easter 26 April 2015

Scripture readings:

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

I John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

You may know that I have some issues with the way the Good Shepherd has been portrayed widely in the Church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly in stained glass. You know what I mean - the bearded lady with three poodles in a night coat. *[laughter]* I think the images that we use in church and in worship affect the way we understand and theologize about God, and I suppose at a certain time and place that image of Jesus in bathrobe with poodles which he may have touched....I'm not sure. One he may have held. It depends. I think maybe the Methodists allowed him to hold one. *[laughter]* Sometimes his hand is sort of pointed at them, but they had just come from the poodle parlor. Fluffy and white and clean and lovely - enough to make you gag!

I was talking to Sandy about my home congregation in Allentown earlier about my frustration about how I think a mainline denomination, ours, missed an opportunity to do some very effective Spanish ministry in that place. But in my day the windows in that church were replaced and the largest one was the one back there and guess what it was - Jesus in the bathrobe, the bearded lady with the three poodles. But the decision was made when it was replaced to replace it with a more contemporary understanding. They did a beautiful job with it. Now you have to remember in those days Allentown was a 110,000 blue-collar white people all of whom worked at Mac Truck, Bethlehem Steel, Western Electric, followed the factory bells. I went to a high school with 3,000 kids. Believe this or not, I don't think there were three black kids or Spanish kids in the entire school. And that's relative to the other large window in the church which was the one over the baptismal font which portrayed Jesus standing in the midst of a bunch of kids. "*Suffer the little children to come unto me.*" An Asian kid, a black kid, a Native American kid, maybe even a white one. In the center of that bunch was a Jewish kid - Jesus. It was pretty advanced for its day.

But back to the shepherd. The shepherd who was portrayed in the new window wasn't old enough to have a beard. He was a kid, a youngster. He wasn't wearing a bathrobe. He was wearing a tunic that went down to his knees. The tunic was very obviously and apparently mended. It had been ripped. He had crawled under the thorn bushes to find the sheep. He was wearing sandals. And the sheep he found was not obeying him and walking on a leash like a poodle, but was slung over his shoulders and being carried out of danger and toward safety.

I came to learn early on that that wasn't a really new understanding or depiction of the Good Shepherd. In the Vatican collection is one of the earliest sculptural depictions of Jesus as the Good Shepherd from the fourth century. And look at this: a kid in a tunic with a lamb slung over his shoulder. And the interesting thing about this is the shepherd's looking one way and the sheep is looking another. *[laughter]*

So our images and how we understand what it is when we spend time on a day like today considering what the literary image or what it is the people who generated these images about Jesus were trying to say - what they are and why they're important. In John's Gospel we're dealing with a report from the early Church, and the early Church wants us to understand Jesus as a Good Shepherd, probably for more than one reason. The early Church was grasping ideas about God which were no longer of an old man, which were no longer natured in terms of a contract, which were no longer an angry man, and which were no longer a man in the sky whose intention and full-time job was to punish people who went wrong. Now if that lamb is a symbol of anything, it's a symbol of filthy stupidity, wrongheadedness. It is a symbol of going wrong big

time.

When James and I bought our house here in 1986 there was a farm next to our property. There still is. In the field next to where we had a garden - (We even planted vegetables. Can you believe that effort? It wasn't very successful). There was a large ram in the field next door who was able to mount the fence and get into the vegetable garden. His name was Ben. He was useless. He was too old, but he was a menace - a friendly menace, but a menace nonetheless. And the one thing I learned about sheep - well, the several things I learned about sheep is they are dumb, they are filthy, and they really need a keeper or they're sunk. The other thing I knew when I studied Ben who was there for a reason - that if I were to pick him up I would not put his genitalia next to my face. *[laughter]* That's way different from three poodles from the poodle parlor.

And we are talking about where it is we collect our images and understanding of who God is. It's worth taking a Sunday in Easter to think about what Good Shepherd means.

Some time ago Aunt Gertie - you know Aunt Gertie. She'll be a hundred in July. She was here on Saturday. Aunt Gertie at some point in her travels went to the Holy Land, and she reported to me that it's known in the Middle East if you have a flock of sheep, you need one goat. You need one being that is clean and intelligent because one goat will lead an entire flock of sheep to pasture and to water. Sheep can't do it for themselves. Well, doesn't that make you ask about those passages in scripture that talk about separating the sheep from the goats? Well, think about that a little bit. It may be the sheep who need the savior. It may not be the sheep who *earn* their way in. We usually look at that as these are the ones who deserve and those are the ones who don't deserve. Well, get on the trolley of the non-deserving, and you'll become a Lutheran in no time! *[laughter]*

The business is this: How we imagine God and who it is we imagine God to be affects how it is we relate to each other, it seems to me.

Somewhere along the line in my education, specifically related to the Gospel lesson today, I was taught that in the Middle East sheep folds are stone walls often built in a circular pattern so you can collect all of the sheep in there. But they don't have gates on them. It's just an opening in a circular stone wall, and when the sheep were all in there at night the shepherd himself, in fact, becomes the door. He will lie down in that opening to keep the sheep in and to protect them from predators from the outside. The Gospel today is suggesting that Jesus is like that - a herder of the filthy and the dumb and the protector of the cruddy and undeserving from the predatory influences and degradations and vagaries that would steal from the flock and reduce its value and importance.

Jesus says in the Gospel today, "*I am the gate. I am he who will lie down in front of the open door behind which you can be protected, loved, cared for, fed and cleaned by God, and I will put myself in that vulnerable position in your interest.*"

Now there's a bunch of other stuff going on in the lessons today about Jesus being the only way. Boy, has the Church done stuff with this! "*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.*" You know

what the Church has done with that, don't you? Unless you agree with us, you're going to hell. I don't think that's what this is saying. Be careful because it crops up in the Gospel lesson too. "*So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me...*" Let's think about those things.

Last Thursday night I was privileged to be invited to Moravian Seminary in Bethlehem by our colleague and neighbor, Gregg Schafer, from the Moravian Church to hear a lecture presented by Rev'd James Lawson III who was a part of the coterie around Martin Luther King and very deeply involved in the early civil rights movement. He spent time in jail for refusing to fight in Korea and has spent his life seeking a non-violent way in the world as he seeks justice for all people. A black man. He talked about the Gandhian things. He went to India for three years to study the Gandhian approach to the world and creation. He talked about how violence breeds violence and how violence doesn't answer problems. He talked about how we in this world live in a plantation mentality and economy. We think rich people get rich because they deserve it and forget that there's a whole underclass that does all the work and is enslaved and is essential to the way our economies work. He talked about all of these things which Jesus talked about.

And I think Gandhi, Jesus, whoever gets those understandings - are the way, if you see what I mean. We're not talking about the subscription to a particular kind of creed developed at some point in history by a bunch of Christian men. But we're talking about concepts of who God is and how God and we relate to each other and how that facilitates our relationship to each other in the world. So this business of seeing Jesus as a Good Shepherd is radical to the core, and this business of understanding Jesus as the gate and shepherd of those who are filthy, who are stupid, who are lost, who are in need of a savior, has nothing to do with their deserving or earning salvation but has to do with God's sacrifice and God's graciousness for those who are in need. And that's why I don't mind being a sheep when I'm separated from the goats because I know I stink and I'm dumb. That's called confession. I know I can't find a pasture and I know I would die of thirst without God's guidance.

And so this radical image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd who lays down even his *life* for the sheep is way different from an idea of God who is an angry man demanding sacrifice, payment for sin, righteousness and obedience that pleases God and that God will pay up for if we do it right, well enough, and pay enough with time and good works and money and attendance at church and all of the other things that make us good Christians. To hell with the rest of the world. I'm going to heaven!

One of the things that people like James Lawson and Jesus and Gandhi and others do is wake me up, and I need the waking up from time to time that if, friends, I engage in the business of saving myself I stand at the head of the line of the most selfish people in the world. I am on the slippery downhill backward slide to religious hypocrisy. I am returning to what it is Jesus came to disassemble which was religious ideas that led people to believe that other creatures in this world who are human are not as much loved by God as we are. Now that message was so upsetting to people that those who heard it killed Jesus, and they were the Church, the government, the society, and in the end, friends, even his closest friends. They all abandoned him.

At some point this idea stuck with people as an impossibility, and it *is* impossible unless we are willing to believe it and believe that in believing it, it may cost us our lives. And so the question is what kind of shepherd do you have? How do you see yourself in relationship to that shepherd? And does that change how we relate to each other?

The one thing I have trouble with in terms of the image of the Good Shepherd is recalling the not-to-distant events of Holy Week before Easter. There's no understanding that the sheep might eat the shepherd when he lies down in the door and cannibalize him themselves and turn on the shepherd who protects them. We do it all the time. It's called sin. And we're good at it. But no matter how good we are at that, God is better at being a shepherd. And we've seen God improve at being a shepherd in terms of moving from a bathrobe to a tunic, from poodles to real sheep. And I suggest to you that this Sunday is extraordinarily important in the Easter cycle to remember that Jesus whom we proclaim to be the Son of God, in fact, laid down his life for the truth - the truth that every stinking, rotten, stupid, dirty, undeserving, filthy sheep in the world is the object of God's entire, full and unmitigated love. You can't bomb it away. You can't starve it away. You can't buy it away. You can't do anything with it but believe it and share it. It's extraordinary!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.