

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Fourth Sunday of Easter
7 May 2017

Scripture readings:

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

Anybody want to make a guess why in some places this is called Good Shepherd Sunday? *[laughter]* Some of you know I have feelings about the depictions of the Good Shepherd that we grew up with. In the church where I grew up in Allentown which was an enormous building - this place would fit into it about 10 or 15 times, I believe - there was a large window in the back where the choir is which was put in when the building was built. It was the one you've seen in every church in Christendom that was built during the late 19th and 20th centuries. You know - the Good Shepherd window where Jesus is depicted as a bearded lady in a bathrobe with three poodles. *[laughter]* I loved that, I suppose, when I was a kid because you believe what you're shown. But that's a pretty misleading representation, it seems to me, of these texts.

I went to a jewelry shop yesterday where the people have a couple poodles. They're beautiful standard-size animals - well-kept and picked out and not cut the way they sometimes are with those balls on their feet and all the rest of it. That's embarrassing, isn't it? That's kind of the way I feel about that depiction of Jesus with those three picked-out sheep that look like they've just been to the poodle parlor. *[laughter]*

There came a time in the history of that congregation - which, by the way, is now closed - when it was decided that the windows needed replacement, and when that happened, they decided that they would re-imagine what was depicted over where the choir sits in the back. The Good Shepherd window was replaced with a Good Shepherd window, but it didn't look anything like the one that was there in the first place. It was a Good Shepherd window with a Good Shepherd in it, but this was not a bearded lady; it was a youth too young to have a beard. He was not in flowing robes, but in the tunic that came to above his knee. It was apparent that he was wearing working clothes because there was a patch in the tunic. He was wearing sandals laced up to his knees. He had nothing in his arm and nothing following him, but he had a lamb held by its front feet in one hand and its back feet in the other, and he had that beast over his shoulders.

Now Aunt Gertrude whom I saw yesterday - who is flourishing - has been to the Holy Land. I have not. I think it was she who reported to me that it is known in that part of the world that it only takes one goat to lead an entire flock of sheep. Sheep are stupid.

Twenty-some years ago when James and I bought our house in Newfoundland, the neighbor had a ram who not only stank and didn't know how to stay in his pen, but was incredibly filthy - particularly around the rear end. And I can tell you this - for as much as I know about sheep - in addition to being dumb and dirty, I wouldn't put that near my face and carry it.

Now we're getting somewhere. Katie and Joey were here at 8 o'clock and they figured out that that lamb was probably money. They knew that the sheep was covered not in fur, but wool - and that wool, when it gets caught in a thorn bush, is like velcro. You have the curls on one side and the things that stick, and we figured out that that's what the shepherd's crook was

for - to reach under the thorn bush to get the lamb and pull it out to safety. And even though it was still dirty, the shepherd carried it to safety on his shoulders, rather than appearing to be in some kind of Halloween parade where there are no problems and everything is clean and everybody knows everything is ok.

I preferred the second depiction of the Good Shepherd after I got used to it in my home congregation, and I offer that to you as a better image for us on Good Shepherd Sunday. I asked Katie and Joey at 8 o'clock why it is they thought the shepherd might run the risk of getting dirty and being poked by the thorn bush and even risking all the rest of it to fish that sheep out from under a bush where it had no business being in the first place. It got there by itself. They said, "*Because it's a living thing.*" Ask a child. Ask a child! A living thing - something which has life and couldn't have life unless it had love - had gone astray and needed more love, more care, not so much correction, not so much punishment, but salvation. Kids get it! When you're in trouble, you come home.

And when you can't get home, what it is we believe about God whom we come to know about probably best in the person of Jesus - we believe, teach and confess that we have a God who comes to find us and puts our dirty undercarriage next to his face.

There's another image in the text today which is loaded with extraordinary images about shepherds and sheep and shepherding and all the rest of it. Jesus talks about himself as the gate. It's felt that in the time of Jesus a sheep fold was made of stone and was simply a wall constructed in a circular fashion with an opening left for the door, but there was no gate there. The shepherd became the gate because after all the sheep had been gotten in for the night to be protected from all that would be dangerous and kill them - the robbers, the fox, the wolf, the predators - the shepherd himself would lie down in that opening (a) so that the sheep couldn't get out and (b) so that that which would harm them couldn't get in. So that made it a little more clear for me when I heard that explanation of what Jesus might mean when he said, "*I am the gate.*" No one gets in or comes out without having to deal with me.

Now I must confess to you, I get very itchy, nervous - I chafe when I hear Christians talking about their understanding of this text as Jesus being the gate meaning that unless you're a Christian you don't go to heaven. You know that kind of thinking, don't you? That's popular among us, isn't it? You have to be like one of us, think like one of us, do like one of us or you're going to hell, and we'll make sure you get there in a hurry.

Speaking of going to hell, I heard the story of a local doctor who delivered babies all over this part of the world. There came a time when somebody's house burned down and they needed a birth certificate. It had burned up in the house fire. I guess this was before the county kept records so they had to find people who were there and could testify that this person was indeed the child of this person and was born at that time. They went to the doctor's descendants to find out if the doctor kept a record. The doctor's grandson said, "*Oh yes, I had those books and I burned them all up.*" When he was asked why, he said, "*Because I looked at those books and every time my grandfather knew that somebody died, he would go to the page where they were born or the record of his having taken care of them and if they hadn't paid their bill, he would write across the page in red ink - Died and gone to hell.*" [laughter] We know how to send people to hell if they don't pay their bills.

And Jesus takes all of that economy and blows it to smithereens by saying, "*No, God is more like a shepherd whom you owe nothing because you can't give a shepherd a darn thing and from whom you have to accept everything.*" Sheep are too dumb to find their own pasture.

They're too dumb to find their own water. They're too dumb to be safe. They're too dumb to stay clean. And without the shepherd, they're sunk!

The one thing that sheep do know is the voice of the shepherd. Of course, leave it to the Church to get it backwards! This gospel today says the shepherd goes first and the sheep follow him because the sheep know his voice. Well, you watch the next time you go to an ecclesiastical procession, the person who is seen as the shepherd - who would that be in churches such as ours? Who carries the big stick? The bishop! The crosier is the symbol of a shepherd's crook. Always in an ecclesiastical procession guess who the last one is? The bishop. Now why that inversion happens, I can't tell you. I've heard the argument that the bishop is herding the sheep. Well, that may be. I guess there are different styles of being a herder.

But the thing for us to take away today on Good Shepherd Sunday is that somewhere along the line and from the very early days of the Church, there is this extraordinary willingness on the part of the faithful to understand God represented by Jesus as a shepherd who goes into dangerous places to rescue those who don't deserve it, who finds the lost, who brings them out soiled, dirty, screaming, crying. And you know if that guy had put that lamb down and let those legs go, it would go right back under the bush where it came from, I suppose.

He puts the filthy undercarriage and genitalia right next to his face and carries that thing - that blessed thing, not that damn thing that *blessed* thing to safety. I suppose the rest of the flock might be willing to say "damn thing" but not the shepherd because the shepherd sees the lamb the way Joey saw the lamb - a living thing. Therefore, a blessed thing. Therefore, worthy of God's search. Therefore, worthy of God's love. Therefore, worthy of God's salvation. Not because the sheep proved it but because the sheep needed it. And the nature of God in this Aha moment about the Good Shepherd is that's how God works with us when we are lost, dirty, caught and in need. We believe and teach and celebrate the reality that we have a God who comes to find us when we can't even find ourselves. That's good news! I'll take it!

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