

Easter 4b 2021
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
April 25, 2021

Acts 4:5-12 Psalm 23 1 John 3:16-24 John 10:11-18

Today is often called “Good Shepherd” Sunday, as we celebrate Jesus being the Good Shepherd. What does it take to be a good shepherd? One would have to know where to find food and sometimes shelter for the sheep, feed ourselves, birth lambs, and shear the sheep, and keep them safe. Shepherding is a big, dirty task, low in status and ease. It is not a good livelihood for anyone afraid of hard work ... or the dark. Fields with edible greenery might be far away from home; we would spend our nights under starry or rain-drenched skies.

Our *relationship* with Jesus is that he is our shepherd, the one who keeps us in his fold, the one who sustains us and will do anything for us ... even die. Jesus is not afraid of the dark; there is no darkness that he has not already known. Jesus gets us through the dark nights, when we are huddled in the shadow of his arms. He is with us in the rainy nights in which soaking water baptizes our souls and brings us to new life. He is alongside of us when angels sing in star-filled nights that proclaim Jesus’ birth. Alleluia!

If we carry the metaphors of sheep and shepherd too far we will get turned around very quickly, because Jesus has already told us that he is the door of the sheep (John 10.7) and that he is the good shepherd (John 10.11) who lays down his life for the sheep. Here is the turning upside down part: we thought for a little while that we were the shepherds, that we were in charge, and we made Jesus the lamb that we slaughtered. Not even the darkness of death penned in the true good shepherd. So, too, in our relationship with Jesus, we are not in charge – we are the followers. We pray (at least) weekly that God’s will, not ours, will happen on earth, just as is in heaven. Jesus is such a good provider, in fact, that he tells us that he came so that we could have not only life, but abundant life! Jesus is an amazing – the best – shepherd! We are rather disobedient sheep, continually trying to be in charge, but God keeps us around anyway because He loves us that much!

Having told us about Jesus’ relationship with us (shepherd and sheep), Jesus then tells us about his relationship with God: He and the Father are one (John 10.19-21). Our ancient ears would be on edge. Jesus is claiming to be God, the true shepherd. Jesus’ words would remind us of the words of the prophet Ezekiel:

Ezekiel writes the words that God has given him; we remember that we most often do not want to hear the words that a prophet brings. Hear them now (Ezekiel 34):

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the [false] shepherds Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.... Since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, ... I will rescue my sheep ... I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them; ... I will gather them; ... I will feed them.... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep....

I will seek the lost, I will bring back the strayed, I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.

Jesus is taking claim to being the Good Shepherd who will save the scattered peoples of Jerusalem. Of course, claiming to do only what God can do is outrageous. The deep irony of the gospel, the Good News, is that Jesus' claim is true.

Our question, then, is not what it takes to be a good shepherd, but what it takes to be a follower of Jesus, a sheep in Jesus' fold. We are not consumers of our faith, demanding that God be this or that, or fit into our notion of what a Savior is or does. We are called to be faithful, which, in part, means recognizing that Jesus our Good Shepherd knows the way of God the father. When we center our faith on Jesus, then our right path is the very one that we are on. Faith is believing that our shepherd knows the way. Faith is surrendering our journey to God and our shepherd, knowing that with Jesus, "green pastures can exist where there is no grass; and still waters exist in a rushing river." (Dr. Phil Heinz, paraphrased)

We are entering a new era in Christendom, a time beyond a pandemic that still affects our neighbors in the world, including ourselves. We are seeking still waters in a rushing river; we look for green pastures where there is no grass.

We can move forward with confidence because we know the Good Shepherd, and we know that our Redeemer lives. We can have courage to leave behind those things that do not feed us; we cannot leave behind a single sheep of the flock. It is for all of us that Jesus died. Pray urgently in these days, that the Good Shepherd will gather the sheep of every fold, and that we will follow God's will, knowing that God initiates our faith, God answers our faith, and that we are followers, the sheep.

"In all of our works," as is written in our prayer book, "begun, continued, and ended in Thee," Christ has no body now but ours. Teach us, Good Shepherd, how to be your sheep, your flock.

Alleluia! Amen.