

Fourth Sunday in Easter – April 21, 2024

Text: John 10:11-18

Theme: Jesus is our shepherd. We belong to him.

Ever wondered why the image of Jesus as the good shepherd is so popular? I know it connects back to one of the most beloved psalms of the Old Testament – The Lord is my shepherd – which has inspired all kinds of great music and hymns. But of all the images for God – light, vine, wind, refugee, fortress, eagle, hen, lamb, midwife, king, creator, redeemer, healer (Scripture is full of so many rich images for God) - why is shepherd one that so many people resonate with? Especially, since few (if any of us) have ever seen, interacted with or really have any idea what a shepherd actually does. We have farmers and ranchers. But do we actually have shepherds in this country?

My guess is that the image of shepherd evokes a sense of being cared for. The sheep have someone looking out for them, protecting them, making sure they are fed and safe so they can meander those green pastures peacefully munching on grass! For most of my children's growing up, I was a single pastor and a solo pastor. I still remember after one particularly hard and long day – the kids were fighting, some people at church were upset with me, the dog had chewed on the carpet and thrown up, someone had just died which meant a funeral to plan, the refrigerator was empty AND the toilet was overflowing – I called my father and cried, "Dad, will you just come and take care of me?!" He lived a state away and was the most unhandy man I knew but I didn't care. I was overwhelmed and tired of being the one who had to take care of everyone and everything. I needed someone to take care of me!

We all need that. As beautiful and wonderful as God has created this world and our lives to be – even with the resurrection promise of new life – things can become overwhelming and exhausting, trying to stay on top of, take care of everything on our plates. We hear the promise of that care in our gospel – I am the good shepherd. I know my own. I know what you are going through and dealing with – the wolves that are threatening you. I will not run away or abandon you. I lay down my life for you. I will take care of you. That's why we call Jesus our shepherd and rejoice that we belong to him. And that is the theme of my sermon – Jesus is our shepherd, and we belong to him.

This Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Easter, is often called Good Shepherd Sunday because it always (no matter what lectionary year we are in) includes a reading from the 10th chapter of the gospel of John which talks about Jesus as the gatekeeper and gate, about being the good shepherd who doesn't run away like the hired hand, and giving the sheep who know his voice eternal life. Obviously, this image is important to the gospel of John, but have we ever taken a step back to look at what that image really entails in this gospel?

To be honest, I never paid much attention to what was happening in the gospel of John just prior to this proclamation of Jesus being the good shepherd, what might have prompted this image. Karoline Lewis, in her commentary in *Working Preaching*, points out that this teaching of Jesus as the good shepherd follows the story of the healing of the blind man in chapter 9 and the controversy that creates. Who would be upset with a blind man now being able to see? Why did healing a blind cause conflict? Because the religious authorities argued that the blindness indicated the man was a sinner which meant he should be judged, not healed. But Jesus comes along and instead of judging, condemning, or ignoring the man – heals him. Who did Jesus think he was? God? That is not the way God operates which evokes a response by Jesus wondering if the people who are truly blind are the religious authorities. “Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, we see, your sin remains.’” Ouch! Your sin which you don't even see remains because you cannot, will not see that Jesus, the Word of God made incarnate, came not to condemn the world, but that world might be saved, might be healed through him.

The next verse launches into a description of how Jesus does – as the gate, the one who came” that they, the sheep, might have life and have it abundantly.” Jesus is the good shepherd who doesn't just care for the sheep, keeps the status quo, everyone corralled in their separate pens so everything stays neat and in their place, but who cares in ways that frees the sheep, us, to experience abundant life. As much as we may want the picture of the good shepherd to be peaceful, feel good, no challenges or conflicts to deal with – that is not how Jesus is the good shepherd. He stands in contrast to those who just want the

easy way – running at the first sign of problems, the hired hands. He stands against the wolves that seek to diminish life, to harm God’s beloved – known (not just surface knowing) but known by Jesus, as in a deep abiding relationship. He stands for ALL – not just some who we recognize as belonging, but ALL who bear the image of God and therefore are God’s sheep. This is an image of the one who powerfully faces the forces of evil, of indifference, of selfishness, of death in order to bring us abundant life. That is who cares for us. That is how we are cared for. We belong to this good shepherd.

Notice I said – we belong to this good shepherd, not that this good shepherd belongs to us. That is an important difference. When the blind man was healed and could see, he was able to recognize who Jesus was, believe (trust) in him and worship him – become one of this sheep. When we are cared for by this good shepherd, we are able to recognize who Jesus is among us, to trust his way, and worship him with our lives and actions. Belong to this Good Shepherd, our actions reflect his way – standing in contrast to those who want the easy way out, standing against all that diminishes the life and dignity of others, standing for all – the love of God is for everyone without exception. We don’t get to judge who is in and who is out. We are sent out not to condemn the world but to participate in God’s reign of justice and radical love for all, to use our power for the sake of others.

Martin Luther King Jr. said that “power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” Because we are cared for by the good shepherd, because we know we are secure in God’s hands, because we know we are known by the one who lays down his life for, we can be courageous and compassionate, we can be brave and bold, we can be loving and kind, even on the worst of days.

I know you may be wondering if those not exactly “worse” days, but challenging days are ahead of you because your pastor has announced she is retiring. Who is going to take care of us? Who are we going to rely on? Who is going to be there for us? I would remind you as I would remind all of us – as much as we appreciate our pastors and the ways they care for the church, those who are part of the community of faith – it is Christ, not our

pastors who are the Good Shepherd. The church belongs to Christ, not to pastors, not to us. The call and invitation is to trust that the Spirit continues to hold us and challenge us, continues to care for us and empower us, continues to breath new life into us.