

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
May 7, 2017- 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (A)  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Acts 2.42-47; 1 Peter 2.19-25; **Psalm 23; John 10.1-10**

**'For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.'** †

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Some of the earliest depictions of Jesus Christ we find in the churches and tombs from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century are not of him on a cross or in a manger scene... they are of a young Jesus in a white tunic with a lamb draped over his shoulders. Jesus, "the Good Shepherd" who loves and cares for his sheep. Once again, we're celebrating Good Shepherd Sunday, and hear Jesus refer to himself as 'the shepherd of the sheep' and 'the gate for the sheep.' If these analogies sound a bit odd to you, you're in good company, for the author of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel tells us that he 'used this figure of speech' with his followers, 'but they did not understand what he was saying to them.'

The 'Good Shepherd' motif is part of a series of parables, *paromia* in Greek. These are sayings, comparisons, riddles, or figures of speech, used by Jesus to try to get his disciples to see the truth of his identity and of his mission. They directly follow Jesus' encounter with the scribes and Pharisees after he has healed the blind man. He is reminding them that the scribes and Pharisees are supposed to be the shepherds of Israel, the teachers and shepherds of God's people, yet they don't 'see' who Jesus is, and cannot fathom that his healing, done on the Sabbath, could be of God. They are blind themselves and do not see the work of God in front of them.

Jesus compares them to 'hired hands,' who don't really care about the sheep, but care only for their own gain. They can never really nourish the sheep. In today's passage, he uses even stronger words; he is the gate, through which the sheepfold passes from danger into protected pasture. This gate is for the protection of the sheep. Its not exclusionary, its not about how some sheep are better than others, the gate is not to keep any sheep out, but to guard them all against what threatens their well-being. It's meant to guard the sheep and keep out thieves, bandits and wolves.

Sheep are intriguing creatures. It's such an interesting analogy for Jesus' to use for the children of God. For sheep are best known for their flocking (herding) instinct: they band together in large groups for protection, and when one sheep moves, the rest will follow... even if it is not a good idea. I don't know how many of you have spent any time with sheep. I had the opportunity to research and care for some when I was in high school. Overall, they are docile and at times pretty dumb. They're very social animals that become stressed when they do not have visual contact with other sheep. They follow that 'herd mentality,' following each other, and can easily go astray, away from safe areas, away from food and

water. They tend to wander off, and fall prey to wolves and thieves. Sheep can easily die, if left on their own. They need a shepherd, and so too, children of God!

This week, I must admit I could relate to that need for social contact, the desire to have a friend close by and finally get to look someone in the eye. Being alone can be unnerving, and seeing people only by means of video screens can be draining. But does that make me sheepish? As I think about it, the analogy comparing us to sheep seems insulting. Sheep can be pretty stupid, not to mention dirty and smelly... so what is Jesus really saying?

There is one very important attribute they have— they KNOW the voice of their shepherd. They know who to trust and who not to trust. The sheep of the fold, know the voice of the one who they can trust, who nourishes and cares for them. Sheep follow the true voice of their shepherd, and run from the voice of a stranger. Their shepherd leads them away from harm toward safe pastures, toward abundant life. Jesus is being clear, not only do we need a shepherd, we need to follow the Good Shepherd!

Over the past several weeks, some of us have met by Zoom on Wednesday evenings to ‘try on’ and explore different ways of praying. As a group we practiced different prayer forms. To try different ways to communicate with God, and to listen for God’s voice. Prayer is one way, a great way, to listen for God! It’s a great way to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd! And this week I’ve been reflecting on all of the voices I have been hearing during the pandemic crisis... all the advice that comes through media and from public leaders. And I must admit, I wonder sometimes whether I am hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd or those of wolves.

How often do we recognize the voice of the Shepherd when we hear it? In the midst of our crazy world, we are distracted and scattered by many voices... many voices that are not shepherding. We hear voices that promise power and success... Voices that push us toward a silly ‘herd mentality’ which seeks revenge and drive us to strike out at those we feel are against us... Voices that promise success at the expense of others, that try to separate and divide us... Voices of self-deprecation and voices of self-indulgence, both of which drive us to feel sorry for ourselves, and complain about how hard our lives are or have been. Bah, Bah, Bah! Yeah, we’re sheep!

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want... He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways... so I may dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

Jesus said, the true Shepherd of the sheep knows what his sheep need. The Good Shepherd, knows his own and they know him! Listen for HIS voice in the midst of the present hardship; listen for HIS voice during this time of fear and uncertainty. Follow HIS voice and be good to each other. Follow HIS voice and love those you encounter! Can we hear HIS voice over the voices of the thieves, bandits and wolves all around us? Oh, when we hear his voice, may we know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads.’

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