

Sermon Easter 4 – John 10:11-19

In 2012 when I was undertaking my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education I was asked to visit a man that had become somewhat of a challenge for the hospital. A veteran in his late 60s he was the longest staying patient. He'd been a patient for more than 90 days and the social workers were very keen to get him moved to a rehabilitation unit, but he was refusing to go. After I met him, and we established some trust, he told me of his love for the 23rd psalm. It became a recurrent interest of his in our meetings so one day I asked him if he'd like to recite it with me.

So we started *"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley"* His voice trailed off. I asked him if he was OK but he remained silent. Over the next few days as I explored with him the meaning behind the image of walking through a dark valley, we realized that he was stuck, stuck in that dark valley, lonely, fearful and lost. This image from the psalm became a metaphor for his life. Here he was stuck in the hospital, lonely, fearful and lost.

Psalms 23 is of course one of the most well-known of the psalms and we tend to read it for comfort especially when we are experiencing loss. It is here that the Lord is Shepherd, the caretaker of the sheep. The psalmist says that the shepherd leads – beside still waters, in right paths. We should have no fear because the shepherd is there for us, and the staff is of comfort. We may feel protected and cared for because we

have someone looking out for us. Therefore we can be led out of the dark valley.

The image of the shepherd and the sheep is vivid and scattered throughout the biblical narratives. The prophet Jeremiah draws the strong image of God as the shepherd that gathers the scattered flock of Israel and promises to bring them back to the fold. He promises that they will be settled and thus be able to multiply and he will raise up shepherds who will care for them so that they shall no longer live in fear. Similarly the prophet Ezekiel paints this beautiful image of God gathering in the scattered sheep, tending to their needs, and feeding them with justice.

The symbol of the shepherd and the sheep gives rise to the relationship between the two. A shepherd usually came from the family that owned the sheep and had a vested interest in watching over them. The relationship between the shepherd and the sheep was one of intimate knowledge. The shepherd's intimate knowledge of the sheep allows trust to develop so the sheep can be led. In turn the relationship deepens. This image is a metaphor for the intimate relationship between God and Jesus, and now between Jesus and us.

This deep knowledge contrasts with the hired hands who don't have this deeply intimate relationship to the sheep and are less likely to care for the flock. If you can recall the movie *Brokeback Mountain*, you might remember that those two men hired to guide and protect the sheep up on the ranges were the very image of hired hands, workers that couldn't diligently care for the sheep. As we know they had other things on their minds.

Sheep are very social animals that enjoy the comfort and companionship of the flock. Because the sheep are easily herded they have a reputation for meekness and passivity. The shadow side though of the sheep is a general lack of ability to think or act independently. If one does do so it usually gets into trouble requiring the shepherd to go find it.

Our prevailing world culture seems to want us to think and act independently rather than be meek and passive, but our faith would tell us we are to be counter cultural so maybe the characteristics of sheep are not too far from how God wants us to be, even in today's world. Whatever our view we do know that they are a valuable commodity. In Australia we have a saying that the country was literally built off the sheep's back because the wool that was harvested and sent back to England funded the development of the country through the 19th and most of the 20th centuries. Like sheep I think God sees us as a valuable commodity in this world, no matter what flock we come from or fold we inhabit.

As much as we want to be independent we probably are very much like sheep. We tend to like to socialize in groups, and hopefully we feel comfort and companionship when in communion with others. We also tend to operate with a herd mentality. The trends in fashion, food, entertainment or investments all indicate that we follow the lead of others. We react to the actions of those around us, either through empathy – I see and feel your pain therefore I am going to help you, or we use what we see and experience to make actions for ourselves, which then draws others in – we come to understand our faith because we have experiences of others who are faithful.

In neuroscience this phenomenon is thought to be because we have what is called mirror neurons in our brain. These neurons in a simple explanation cause us to behave in a way that mirrors those we are watching or are aware of. This is a developing area of psychology and many people are very excited about the research work that is being undertaken. More relevant to our situation, as Christians trying to interpret how God is working in the world, a number of theologians and anthropologists are doing very interesting work on the impact of memesis based on mimicry, which is an all-encompassing expression of imitation based on the developing understanding of mirror neurons, and our propensity to imitate the actions of others. It is very interesting work but it really is for another day.

In this Easter season I couldn't help but to reflect on the risen Jesus' commission to Peter out on the beach. He says three times to him, "feed my sheep." Jesus commissions Peter to essentially become a shepherd, to follow Jesus' footsteps. We all need to be led at various times in our lives, and we all probably are called upon to lead others at times in their lives. We are shepherds and we are sheep. Together in the church we share these stories and experiences so as to help one another be led or to lead.

In our church the bishop, as the successor to the apostles, is our shepherd figure. A symbol of the office of the bishop is the crozier, which is shaped like the shepherd's crook. This symbol remains here next to the cathedra to mark the place of the bishop in the church, the chief shepherd of this diocese.

Our bishop Lawrence is charged with the responsibility to be a servant leader of our diocese. He leads us, but we also lead him. We pray for

him, we welcome him, we tell him our stories and maybe our confessions. These impact him and guide him and his prayer life, his pastoral care and his outreach and leadership of the diocese. The shepherd is both servant to, and leader of, the sheep.

Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. We can be forever reminded of this here in the cathedral. In the central stained glass window above the Holy table, Jesus is depicted as the shepherd, saving the lost sheep, which might be us, or the patient that I worked with back in 2012. He was for me that image of a sheep, lost in his dark valley, lonely and in need of support to overcome his fears. He eventually did and agreed to rehabilitation and soon left the hospital.

As you meditate upon the gospel for today and hopefully these words of mine, I pray that you may see how God provides for us to be led out of dark places and then how we, like Peter, help others from their dark places. Together as a church we celebrate what this all means and seek our spiritual nourishment for those journeys here at this holy table, and here in communion with one another.