

Sermon – Easter 4 – St Mary's Lake Ronkonkoma

Good Shepherd Sunday – John 10: 1-10

You may have guessed by now that I am not from these parts. The only part of me that might have given you a clue was my less than Long Island accent. My accent is a result of being born in Australia and spending most of my life there. When people find out I am from Australia they mostly ask me whether the TV shows depicting all the poisonous snakes and spiders are true or not. Well they are! It is a beautiful country indeed. The indigenous Aborigines are the oldest continuing culture on the planet being there for some 30,000+ years. Most of the current population and culture have been imported.

One aspect of Australia that you might not know about, but seems to sit the biblical theme of Good Shepherd Sunday, is that we have the second highest ratio of sheep to people after New Zealand. There is roughly 80,000,000 sheep or four sheep for every person in Australia. The benefit of course is that we have some of the best wool in the world and of course cheap lamb, a staple meat on which I was raised.

Sheep are often thought of as dumb animals but in fact they are reasonably smart on par with cattle and pigs. They are instinctive animals that very much stick together in herds for protection but can be lead and mustered quite easily. If you have ever tried to get close to a sheep you will know that they are a little skittish and will scatter when they are approached. Walking through a flock of sheep can feel very much like Moses parting the sea. Sheep do however respond to the voice of someone they trust. They learn to associate the voice from a young age with safety and food. When one sheep feels safe to follow the voice, the others will generally fall in behind and follow as well. This characteristic, and staying together for protection, make them relatively easy to control.

Sheep have been a part of human existence for millennia. Sheep and shepherds have also provided rich imagery for storytellers, artists and religious groups. In the Hebrew texts images of sheep and lambs appear early in the evolution of God's unveiling of the covenant with the world. We all know the story of Abraham and his willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. God however put an end to human sacrifice by substituting a lamb for Isaac. The lamb also became the symbol of the Passover. God called for a lamb to be killed and it's blood used to mark the doors of the homes over which God's spirit was to pass, sparing the first born from death.

Some time later Ezekiel likens the kings of his day to shepherds casting them as false shepherds because they did not care for their sheep and did little to protect the weakest from exploitation. This imagery can be expanded to illustrate how the shepherd king's role both socially and culturally was always to choreograph the sacrificial passions of their cultures, directing the people toward expendable victims. It was either do this or become sacrificial victims themselves. This was in part the evolution of scapegoating, reversing God's intent to use animals and not humans. This was in part the corruption of the world that brought God to earth incarnate in Jesus.

We get a taste this morning for how Jesus arrested this backsliding in human culture. Our gospel reading comes today from the 10th chapter of the gospel according to John where Jesus is

continuing to address the Pharisees who have just witnessed the healing of the blind man. In the first chapter of this gospel account John the Baptist proclaims, “behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” John the Baptist proclaims to the community that Jesus is to be the new sacrificial lamb. It would however take sometime for the community to truly understand what John was proclaiming about Jesus.

By the time of Jesus ministry lambs had been the staple sacrificial animal for centuries and were an entrenched part of the religious practices at the temple. In order to continue these practices the temples needed a steady stream of lambs and so holding pens were a part of the temple precinct. The sheep were herded from the pastures outside the city, through the sheep gate in the city’s protective wall and to the holding pens in the temple grounds. The gate was essentially a one-way gate. The sheep came in but didn’t go out.

In the verses after our reading for today Jesus describes himself as the “good shepherd,” a contrast to the less than good shepherds of Ezekiel’s day. To be the good shepherd Jesus becomes willing to walk into the holding pen with the sheep and to eventually go ahead of them to be the sacrificial lamb for the world. Jesus through his death and resurrection is able to lead the sheep out of the abattoir holding pens to a new pasture, something that has never happened before. Only someone who had been given the power to defeat death could lead his sheep out of the place of shame, wrath and sacrifice, to a place of peace, abundance and nurturing.

As Jesus assumes this position he becomes for us the gate to the path out of death and darkness. No longer does the path lead to the dead end of death. The familiar voice of Jesus settles the sheep so they follow. A person other than Jesus, a thief or a bandit, would not be successful in leading the sheep anywhere rather they would scatter them because their voice is unknown. In the temple the priests and temple assistants would never enter the temple through the sheep pen or through the abattoir door, they would always enter by the special door. It is only Jesus that becomes the shepherd willing to walk the whole journey of the sheep that will follow him.

In these fifty days of Easter we remember the transition of Jesus from death to life and then ascended to God. At Pentecost we will celebrate the sending of the Holy Spirit to be for us the new shepherd that will be our advocate and guide as we too walk the path of life together.

John tells us that the Pharisees and other people he was addressing did not understand this analogy, this figure of speech that Jesus uses. The concept of Jesus, the good shepherd, leading his sheep to the sacrificial table was incomprehensible to them, an idea so alien they had no concept of it. Jesus has to then explain it to them that indeed he is the gate through which those that pass will be saved. All of us are invited to follow the voice of Jesus as we are called to enter a new pasture by going through the gate that first leads to death but then to new life.

It is through our baptism that we participate in this journey. First we renounce our past lives, move through the waters of baptism symbolizing the passage through death and then life comes a new as we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, the new shepherd and guide for our earthly journeys.

Psalm 23 succinctly illustrates the image of this journey. The Lord leads and provides. The Lord revives our souls and guides us along right pathways. Even though this pathway leads through the

valley of the shadow of death, we have nothing to fear because the Lord is with us. Even in the presence of those that trouble us in life, the Lord will provide for us with more than we could ever need.

We often read this psalm at funerals because it illustrates beautifully our life's journey if we only are able to say yes to the Lord and to follow the good shepherd.

We are here together this morning to hear the voice of the shepherd that calls us to follow him. We come together as a community like the first century Christians did with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. May the Lord do now what he did then and continue to call people to this community of faith. May we be blessed to be at once both sheep that follow the Lord's voice and also shepherds that lead others to that one same voice.

The work for us as sheep and shepherds reminds me of the prayer of St Francis "Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life."