

Sermon – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Good Shepherd Sunday – John 10: 11-18

The gospel according to John is distinct from the three synoptic gospels in how he records the life of Jesus. The gospel reading we just heard is the closest John comes to recording a parable. The synoptic gospels are full of parables but John uses a pattern of “I am” statements as a tool to tell of Jesus life. First Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” Then, “I am the light of the world,” “I am the gate for the sheep,” “I am the resurrection and the life,” “I am the way, the truth and the life,” “I am the true vine,” and the subject of today’s gospel reading, “I am the good shepherd.”

To be a good shepherd you need sheep of course. Sheep are often thought of as dumb animals but in fact they are reasonably smart on par with cattle and pigs, if that helps. 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 provided a lamb as a substitute for Isaac, putting an end to human sacrifice.

The allegory centered on shepherds and sheep continues in Ezekiel where he 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 tried to arrest this backsliding in human culture by portraying 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.

The qualities of a good shepherd should be a willingness to stay with the sheep at all times to protect them from straying and being attacked by wild animals. A shepherd must develop mutual knowledge of the sheep so that the sheep learn to trust their voice and so follow willingly with less distraction. The shepherd must also give of themselves for the benefit of the sheep and show authority and foresight. The shepherd must also go after the lost and straying sheep to return them to the flock. Overall they must be good leaders.

In contrast hire hands tend to be less dedicated and more easily distracted from their main responsibility. We might say that hired hands they have “no skin in the game”, no real sense of responsibility. When someone feels they have no responsibility or that their work is “just a job,” easily replaced with another one, they become less dedicated to their role and less effective with their charges.

Sheep need to trust their shepherd in order to follow. The familiar voice settles the sheep so they do follow out to the rich pastures. A person other than the trusted and familiar shepherd would not be successful in leading the sheep anywhere. More than likely they would scatter them because their voice is unknown. For us it is only Jesus that becomes the shepherd with the trusted voice willing to walk the whole journey of life so that we will follow him.

John tells us that the Pharisees and other people Jesus was addressing did not understand this allegory. The concept of Jesus as a good shepherd, leading his sheep to the sacrificial table was incomprehensible to them. Jesus had to then explain to them that indeed he was the Good Shepherd who would lead his people to salvation.

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.

In these fifty days of Easter we remember the transition of Jesus from death to life before he ascended to God, his father. At Pentecost, which we celebrate in a months time, we recall the incredible and promised action of the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was to be for us the new shepherd that would be our advocate and guide as we too walk the path of life together.

Anyone in leadership knows how difficult it is to lead a group, to hold the group together and provide a trusted voice. Many people want to wander off or butt heads with one another just like sheep. We can understand Jesus’ frustration when this happened and people didn’t trust him and follow him.

Jesus is a model of faithful leadership and provides for each of us. Leaders need to build trust with their flock and develop relationships to be more than superficial. We need to be willing to stay focused when the times get tough in order to protect and care for others. A good shepherd is resolute, compassionate, just and loving.

We are here together this morning to hear the voice of the shepherd that calls us to follow. 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. Jesus calls us all into the fold to see him and experience him as our trusted life leader, our focus and our protector.

The Rev. Andrew Durbidge
The Church of St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn NY
Sunday April 25, 2021

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.

Amen