

GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY – THE SHEPHERD BECAME A SHEEP AND MAYBE THE SHEEP CAN BECOME SHEPHERDS.

“Now, O Lord, take my lips and speak through them;

Take our minds and think through them;

Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for Yourself, Lord Jesus. Amen.”

Good morning, I know this is bad homiletic practice, but I am going to ask you to think of three images today.

- Think of a shepherd strong and heroic,
- Think of a sheep vulnerable and dependent,
- Think of the darkest thickest forest.

Ok, hold on to those thoughts for a moment.

“I am the good shepherd.” This statement is so meaningful for our understanding of who Jesus is.

We have an image of the shepherd as big and strong, gentle and loving. He does not drive the sheep forward, he leads them. He will carry the weak ones if they are struggling.

The shepherd has a lonely job always watching in the wilderness. Aware of the dangers in the dark, wild animals just waiting to snatch the lost sheep who wander off.

The shepherd is an image used throughout the Old Testament and an image the Jews of the time would clearly understand. The kings and the rulers of Israel and Judah were entrusted with the welfare of god's people. The king's job was to protect the people from attack, provide for the poor and needy, and ensure justice and the welfare of the people. However, the Old Testament makes it quite clear that they consistently failed.

Instead, the kings and rulers protect themselves, provided for themselves and in the end; the people of god were scattered and unprotected.

God was the true shepherd.

In Ezekiel god says to the prophet, “I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out as shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among the scattered sheep”

In today's psalm we here one of the bible's most vivid shepherd images for god *“the lord is my shepherd I shall not want, he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he revives my soul and guides me along right paths ways for his name's sake”*. God gives us everything we need; food, beauty, security, fellowship. Nothing is missing from god's gifts to us all.

The lord's strength protects us from dangers the same way a Shepard would protect his sheep from coyotes, wolves and bears. *“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod, and your staff they comfort me.”*

The people of Israel are surrounded by god's love just as we are; *“surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of our life and we will dwell in your house of the lord forever.”*

God is the shepherd and protector of the people of Israel.

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“I am the good shepherd.” This statement is so meaningful for our understanding of who Jesus is.

In today's gospel, the reading starts with the conflict between Jesus and the Jews. Well not the Jewish people but the Pharisees in particular, the people in power, people with prestige and position to protect. In fact, this is where they decide Jesus should be killed.

They see all the good things that he is done, but Jesus does not follow their rules. He does not agree with everything that they say. He does not acknowledge their power or prestige. Since Jesus does not follow the Pharisees rules and beliefs, he must be a troublemaker, a rebel, someone that will upset the status quo.

They ask him, “Why don’t you just tell us that you are the messiah.” Jesus is frustrated with them, Jesus could tell them and has shown them repeatedly but they will not listen; he knows what is in their hearts.

So Jesus tells them that my sheep hear my voice they know what I tell them is true. You will never follow me because you do not hear my voice.

I think if Jesus put it in today's terms, he would say you could not hear what I am saying because you are too busy hanging on to your possessions, notions and your perceived power.

You have not been listening to the truth that is right in front of you because it makes you uncomfortable. Following Jesus’s call changes everything in your life. Those who “think they have everything” are less willing to let the truth disrupt their comfortable life.¹

It is as if Jesus does not want to waste any more time trying to convince them.

He knows that someday when their comfortable life fails, perhaps then, they will hear the shepherd's voice and return to the flock.

I have often wondered if an atheist in times of strife or death in those last moments calls to god, just in case they were wrong. I hope they do

I do not want to give you the idea that those who believe are in the flock and are safe. Those who do not believe are out of the flock. If that were true then we would be just like those questioning Jesus.

It is not an us or them type of situation. All of us and I mean all humanity are god's children, we are all his sheep. Some choose to follow, some do not, nevertheless we are all his.

Now I do not want you to think for a moment that I am always in the flock listening to god. I once read that we stand on the line with one foot in the flock and one foot out of the flock, I think that is a very true representation for us all. The good news is that the good shepherd will find us when we are lost and bring us back to safety.

So,

God is the good shepherd and protector of the people of Israel and Jesus Christ is the good shepherd and protector of all people.

¹ Lectionary.org

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This Gospel makes it clear that he is the good shepherd just as God is the good shepherd reinforces the doctrine that Jesus and God are one.

The second image I asked you to think about was a sheep. The bible shows sheep in two very different ways.

The first is the sheep in a flock. Sheep may be the dumbest animals in the world.

Dogs and cats are much smarter than sheep.

Sheep have free will; they are not penned in they are free to wander off. If a dog or a cat wanders off, they can find their way home. Not sheep.

Sheep are defenseless from predators, dogs and cats can protect themselves. Even Rizzo my Chihuahua can defend himself and our property from the invading deer and squirrels. Dogs and cats can hunt to feed themselves. Sheep need to be led to food and water. Cat owners know their cats are smart they actually have staff.

The sheep is dependent on the shepherd for everything. It is an intimate relationship.

The other image of sheep is the sacrificial lamb, the best of the best, perfect in every way, the prize, the one who pays the ultimate price for someone else's sins.

Jesus is the pure white lamb that is sacrificed for the sins of the world. We are the sheep who wander off and are stuck in the ditch or thicket.

In a sense, Christ is the shepherd who has become the sheep.

The last image I had asked you to think of was the darkest deepest forest possible.

Imagine you are hiking in unfamiliar territory and become hopelessly lost, the sun light is fading, the path is becoming harder and harder to see. Then through the darkness of fear and anxiety, you hear a familiar voice calling to you. You know you are safe, you know whether to turn around or the keep going. In those moments, we listen so hard it almost hurts our ears.

However, the call I am referring to a call we all can hear, if we can silence the noise in our lives.

Sometimes I know exactly what God wants me to do, how to act; what to say. Then there are times when the noise of life is so loud, I cannot hear God's voice.

Fortunately, I heard a call.

Just about 24 hours ago, nine people answered a call.

We were ordained into the blessed order of deacons. I would like to thank the people of Holy Comforter, the vestry and of course, Hilary for the support and the many opportunities I have been given throughout my internship.

Five years ago, I would have never guessed that I would someday be an ordained deacon.

My call is to be a servant of God; just as you are called is to be a servant of God.

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I have been called to travel with you doing his work, protecting the weak, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless ensure justice and the welfare of his people. We are called to the work of the shepherd.

In a sense, we can be the sheep that become a shepherd.

“Good Shepherd, teach us to follow you and to be faithful to the calling you gave us. To be shepherds in your name.”² Amen

² John van de Laar