

April 25, 2021

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

“Outcasts”

Psalm 23 ~ 1 John 3:16-24 ~ John 10:1-18

Be honest, when you heard the readings this morning, how many of you pictured Jesus “the Good Shepherd” looking something like the pictures you have seen in many a church, including this one. You know the pictures I mean. Jesus looking down tenderly at the lamb nestled in his arms. Or Jesus striding along with a lamb draped over his neck.

It’s the immediate image that comes to mind, and there’s nothing inherently wrong with it really. This image is ubiquitous, and I don’t think I have ever attended or served a church that didn’t display one. It’s everywhere!

Of course, there’s a lot missing from this kind of picture. For a shepherd who is supposed to be sleeping and working outside, there’s a surprising lack of dirt. The Jesus in those pictures doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who would smell like sheep. I wouldn’t expect to see *this* Jesus trudging through the rocky Palestinian hills in search of a patch of grass with a bunch of stubborn sheep. I see him instead walking through a field of wildflowers with happy frolicking lambs bouncing around him as music swells in the background.

In fact, I’m not sure I’d trust this guy as a shepherd. He looks too much like most of us to be any good at such a hard-scrabble job.

But we see these images of Jesus as a doe-eyed good shepherd, cuddling a tiny helpless lamb or carrying one over his shoulders, and it’s a comforting and nostalgic image for us. We immediately begin to think of Psalm 23 perhaps, of never wanting for anything, of having a banquet table prepared for us in the presence of our enemies, of still waters and green pastures.

It’s an image of gentle power, of someone who can control the uncontrollable in our world. And isn’t that what we want of Jesus?

We want Jesus to tame what is wild and unruly in the world, who with the crook of his staff, can solve what is unsolvable ... and answer what is unanswerable in life ... who can protect and defend against the thieves and bandits of this world who come only to steal, kill, and destroy.

Regardless of what we want, though, we eventually come face-to-face with the reality that the world is still wild and unruly ... that there are still questions without answers ... that there are still thieves and bandits in the world bent on destruction.

Where was the Good Shepherd in the midst of mass shootings? In the midst of kidnappings and executions? In the midst of violence against people of color and other ethnicities in our own streets? In the midst of global pandemic?

Look around you ... the wolves are out in force. And they are howling for our souls. From relentless economic and social pressures to a coarsening of community standards ... from a growing lack of civility to increasing insensitivity, isolation and alienation ... from purposeless personal drift to depression and despair ... from enslaving addictions to family violence ... from easily accessible internet pornography to the horrors of child abuse ... we are under constant assault.

Where is the shepherd that will sanitize all that is wrong with the world ... who will clean up all that is messy and misplaced in our lives?

I asked myself these questions as I read over this text, and it struck me that these questions stem from a *misreading* of these good shepherd passages in John.

Because, really, what I was asking for was to live within the walled-off security of the sheepfold. The sheepfold was essentially a pen in the wilderness constructed of large stones. It kept the sheep safe and was guarded by a gatekeeper while the shepherd was away.

I asked myself where the shepherd was, and I didn't like the answer the text gave. Because it meant that I'd gotten the safe-and-secure image of the shepherd wrong all these years.

I'd always assumed the shepherd was leading the flock to safety. But that's not really the case is it? Instead, the shepherd arrives at the sheepfold and calls the sheep *away* from the safety of the walled-off pen. And they *follow* the shepherd.

Not to safety, but to the open wilderness. Because that's where the shepherd *always* is. The shepherd isn't in the sheepfold. The shepherd is beyond its boundaries ... beyond the walls ... beyond a place of safety and comfort.

The shepherd comes to drive out his sheep from safety ... *into* pasture where there is abundant life.

Abundant life is not necessarily a safe life, mind you. Out beyond the sheep pen, there are most certainly green pastures and still waters ... but there are also roaming predators, wolves and bandits. There is also a valley shadowed by death.

Now, it's not just our images of the shepherd we've sanitized and cleaned up. We've done it to our text as well. We sheepishly say that Jesus simply "brings out all his own" from the sheep pen, but the Greek is so much more interesting. The verb used here is actually the exact same verb the gospel writers use to describe the violent casting out of demons.

The shepherd *casts out* his sheep from the safety of the pen. Suddenly, these sheep who have heard the shepherd's voice are quite literally — out cast!

In the historical context of John's gospel, this makes sense. Written in the latter half of the 1st century ... and after the destruction of the Temple by Roman military forces ... John's gospel is set amidst an intense conflict within Judaism, which resulted in the expulsion of Jewish-Christians from the synagogue. In other words, like the sheep in the story, early followers of Christ were cast out from the safety of the sheepfold.

So, this text could very well have offered comfort to these outcast Jews who followed Christ by reminding them that Jesus was outside the sheepfold ... and that all they had to do was continue to follow his voice to find good pasture to restore their souls.

Still, it must have been terrifying and painful to have to leave the safe sanctuary of the faith of their fathers and mothers. It must have hurt to have the doors of the religious institutions shut in their faces because of their beliefs. It must have been incredibly disorienting to feel like they no longer belonged in the faith that birthed their own faith.

But they *and we* can take comfort in the fact that The Good Shepherd is good not just because he fixes everything ... but because he lays down his life for *everyone*. For those who fit in and those who don't. For those who stay in the sheep pen and those who are outcast.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus lives at the edges of polite society, out in the wild, untamed places of the world. His life remains perpetually in danger. He faces again and again the mockery of the hirelings, who consider his self-sacrificial vocation absurd. Because he's in it for the long haul with his flock, he not only frolics with lambs, but wrestles with wolves. He not only tends the wounds of his beloved rams and ewes; he buries them when their time comes.

Is it really any wonder why the Church has turned this Shepherd into a greeting card? It's so hard to face who he really is. To contemplate what he in fact requires of us. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and *we* ought to lay down our lives for one another," as our reading this morning from 1^s John reminds us.

How will we incarnate the love of this magnificent shepherd? How will we spread his goodness in the wildest of wild places? In the valleys, amongst the wolves ... within the flock and beyond.

As I read and re-read this text, I kept coming back to this image of Jesus casting out the sheep from the sheep pen and calling them out to the pasture in the wilderness. I kept thinking about how often in the Gospels Jesus breaks bread with the outcasts and those that society considered sinners. I kept thinking how often Jesus held these outsiders up as examples of profound faith ... of how Jesus chose the despised to befriend. I kept thinking about how Jesus says that whenever we see the hungry, the poor, the lonely, the disenfranchised — the outcast — we are seeing Jesus himself.

And then I began to wonder ... when we hear the voices of those outcasts in our society, those disenfranchised and marginalized, do we hear that voice for what it is? The voice of Jesus — the voice of the shepherd — calling us out from the safety of the sheepfold to be a flock of the cast-out.

I'm not suggesting that we all sell our possessions and give them to the poor ... though Jesus does. I'm not suggesting that we hold our possessions and money in common so that none among us will be in need ... though that's how Acts says the early church functioned.

I'm not suggesting we need to spend more time among the outcast and marginalized because it makes us good people and better Christians to serve those in need or to lend a helping hand.

To do so would miss the point of being cast out of the safety of the sheep pen. The point is not to do what is right or to help others out. The point is simply to be where the shepherd is. And the shepherd isn't in the sheep pen!

As Lilla Watson, an aboriginal woman in Australia explained to well-intentioned folk coming to help the outcast there, ““If you come here to help me, you are wasting our time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

That is the point. That in some way, this boundary-crossing shepherd is calling us to the idea that our liberation — our salvation — is tied up with the salvation and liberation of all people. It is significant that Jesus identifies himself as The Good Shepherd... not as A Good Shepherd. His guardianship is universal. And to make the point, he tells us: *I have other sheep that do not belong to this flock. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.* As he has throughout his ministry, Jesus is telling his disciples that his New Covenant is not the private preserve of the Chosen People. He is the Shepherd of Jew and gentile... free and slave... men and women, alike. He is the Savior of the World ... not the warrior king of Israel. And so, down through the ages... in persecution and schism... in Reformation and Counter Reformation... in war and peace ... the shepherd comes to the sheep pen and calls us all out into the wild pasture. Because that is where salvation — abundant life — is waiting.

May we pray?

Gracious God, forgive us our selfish, irreverent ways, always demanding more from you while ignoring the needs of our brothers and sisters. Teach us reverence. Teach us gratitude. Teach us how to see you in each other. And we will trust in you, our Shepherd, to lead us into LIFE...abundant and everlasting. Amen.