

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 13, 2008

Lessons: Psalm 23; Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

IN THE NAME OF THE FATER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.”

Where were you when you first heard those words? Can you remember? For a lot of us we were probably in Sunday School. In fact, those may very well have been the very first words from the Bible that we were asked to memorize. And think about how many times you have said them over the years! “The Lord is my shepherd”.

Today is the Forth Sunday of Easter, and as you may have guessed after reading the 23rd Psalm together and hearing John’s Gospel, today has a special focus. Today is often referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday”, and it offers us a good opportunity to pause and reflect on just what that might mean for our lives.

I would guess that over the years, probably starting in Sunday school, we have all seen images of Jesus carrying a lamb on his shoulders and we have heard Jesus described as the “good shepherd”, *our* “good shepherd”. And it is in the verses that follow today’s reading from John’s Gospel where we actually hear Jesus say to his followers twice, in verse 11 and verse 14, that: *“I am the good shepherd.”*

Although the image and concept of a shepherd may not be very familiar to us, the concept of shepherds was frequently used in the Bible. At both the time and the geographical location that the Old Testament, the Psalms and the New Testament were written, shepherds were a very common sight. And the title shepherd was used to describe not only the role of those who were leaders of the sheep and goats, but also those who were the leaders of people. Shepherds were an important part of their lives.

So this morning, on this “Good Shepherd Sunday, let’s look more closely at how this concept of Shepherd and sheep could be applied to our lives. And as we do this, let’s give ourselves “permission” to think of this in much broader terms than we might normally do. Let’s think of the literal description that we hear and then try to expand the concept into what it might mean for us.

First, let’s think about, and try to picture in our minds, an actual shepherd. Start by remembering that a shepherd was willing to lay down his life for his sheep. Now, listen to the words of Scottish New Testament Professor William Barclay. He writes:

“The Palestinian shepherd had different ways of doing things...and, to get the full meaning of this picture, we must look at the shepherd and the way in which he worked.

“His equipment was very simple. He had his ‘scrip’, a bag made of the skin of an animal, in which he carried his food. In it he would have no more than bread, dried fruit, some olives and cheese. He had his ‘sling’. The skill of many of the men of Palestine was such that, (as described in Judges 20:16) they ‘could sling a stone at a hair and not miss’. The shepherd used his sling as a weapon of offence and defense; but he made one curious use of it. There were no sheep dogs in Palestine, and, when the shepherd wished to call back a sheep which was straying away, he fitted a stone into his sling and landed it just in front of the straying sheep’s nose as a warning to turn back. (The shepherd) had his ‘staff’, a short wooden club which had a lump of wood at the end often studded with nails. It usually had a slit in the handle at the top, through which a thong passed; and by the thong the staff swung at the shepherd’s belt. His staff was the weapon with which he defended himself and his flock against marauding beasts and robbers. He had his ‘rod’, which was like the shepherd’s crook. With it he could catch and pull back any sheep which was moving to stray away...”

Shepherds were brave, they were skilled, they had useful equipment and they were willing to lay down their lives for their flock. A few moments ago we heard Jesus say that the sheep listen to the shepherd’s voice. The shepherd calls them by name and leads them...he goes ahead of them and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. Try to picture a flock of sheep following along behind their shepherd?

Now, let’s think about us, you and me, and let’s expand our thinking. As one of our “Good Shepherd’s” flock, how often do you think about actually being led, about being protected? Do you really believe that your shepherd can and will rescue you from trouble? Is it possible that your shepherd wants to lead you to greener grass and to better, safer waters? Will you let Him? Will you follow him?

And as you think about your life. How often do you go off on your own. How often do you wander away from the rest of the flock, and from the shepherd? And when that happens, what has brought you back? Can you remember those times when you could feel the shepherd’s crook begin to guide you back or notice the rock from the shepherd’s sling land close in front of you to stop you or change your direction?

Try to get a very realistic picture in your mind of Jesus as a really skilled shepherd. Try to picture Him lying down in front of a sheepfold and blocking the door so that wild animals or thieves can not get in and cause harm. Picture Him going out and looking for you when you have strayed, gotten lost or been injured. And picture His joy when he has found you. Try to picture Jesus, the “Good Shepherd”...*your* “Good Shepherd.”

And now, also remember *these* words that we just heard Jesus say about the shepherd:

“...the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them...his sheep follow him because they know his voice...because they know his voice.”

In Palestine, where the sheep were used mainly for wool, it was not uncommon for the sheep and the shepherd to be together for many years. Often each of the sheep had their own name and over the years they would have become very familiar with hearing the shepherd call to them.

But what about us? Are we really familiar with the voice of our Shepherd? We all know that in our everyday human relationships it is not possible to have a close relationship with a friend, a child, a parent or a spouse without spending a good amount of time together, talking, listening and sharing. And it is the same with God.

In “*Joys of the Lord*”, a book of daily meditations based on the writings of St. John, the author writes:

“The strength of the shepherd image is the bond between the shepherd and the members of (the) flock. The sheep bond in trust to the shepherd, therefore they can be led to where they need to go. That is the bond between the Followers of our Good Shepherd and the Shepherd. Trust is built in that relationship over time. It cannot happen overnight, ...The author continues:

“Isn’t it amazing that, although we know in our lives that the love-bond is built upon trust and familiarity, we think the Spiritual World is different? How much time do we really spend in any form of connectedness with our Shepherd? How much time do we spend in prayer, in meditation, in thinking about spiritual matters, or in worship experiences? With little time, how can we get to ‘know’ Jesus, and He get to ‘know’ us? This richness of our spiritual lives, the degree of love, joy, and peace in our lives, is directly proportionate to the time we spend in getting to ‘know’ Jesus.”

Knowing Jesus and the sound of His voice is important. It is very important. So how do we hear the voice of Jesus? How do we learn to recognize the voice of our shepherd so that we may follow him?

Well the good news is that it can be done, and to help us to do this, we, as a congregation, have committed ourselves to the concept of Lectio Divina, the practice of daily spiritual reading and to our times of silence, our times of contemplation, listening for words from our shepherd to guide us and to change us into the people that God has intended us to be. And there is a very high probability that the time we are spending as individuals and as a congregation studying the “Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton” series will provide many more insights. The important thing, is for us to listen and to hear what God wants us to hear...and then to follow.

This week let’s try something. This week, let’s really think about, meditate on, the image of the shepherd...our “Good Shepherd”. Then, as we go throughout our days, let’s try to really feel, to sense His presence. Try to actually feel His eyes upon you as you go about your day. See if you can recognize a rock from his sling as it lands near you or feel his crook on your shoulder should you start to stray. And should you become lost or hurt,

feel His arms as He picks you up and carries you. This week, let's really try to be conscious of the presence of our shepherd...our "Good Shepherd".

AMEN