

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2009

The Good Shepherd

Acts 4: 5-12, Psalm 23, 1 John 3: 16-24, John 10: 11-18

The Comforting Image

The Good Shepherd is such a comforting image for those of us in the 21st Century. Many of us grew up with images of Jesus the Good Shepherd holding a lamb with adoring sheep around his feet. The image of the Good Shepherd underlies many of the stories that are told to our children in Godly Play. Today they will be learning about the good shepherd protecting the flock from the wolf. But, they will also make a connection between the good shepherd and feeding at this holy table in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Psalm 23 is probably the best known psalm among Christians. It is God as Shepherd who leads us to green pastures and to the still water – he will provide for our needs. It is the Good Shepherd who will protect us – even as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God will be with me. In our deepest pain we are consoled and comforted by the words of Psalm 23. For many of us it is probably the only Psalm that we know by heart or can identify. It is the most frequently used psalm at funerals.

We see the Good Shepherd as leading, comforting, and protecting. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will call us each by name. We are assured of intimacy and belonging. There is a close personal experience between the Shepherd and the sheep. Jesus knows his sheep and we know his voice when we are called. We are loved and cherished and known by a loving God. We experience the abundance of God's grace because we are loved by God.

Belonging to Jesus – knowing him and being known by him shapes us as a community of faith. We are one flock with one shepherd. It's comforting and makes for great musical compositions. But we need to listen and pay closer attention to what this gospel is saying.

The Metaphor

John uses the metaphor of the Good Shepherd to try to make sense of the Easter event. First century Christians reflected on the experience of Jesus, and used images, and their understanding of God, to make sense of their current reality. What we experience as comforting in the metaphor of the Good Shepherd the church of the first century heard as a challenge. The metaphor of Jesus being like the Good Shepherd would have been scandalous to that community. Shepherds were the menial workers, dirty and smelly. It would be equivalent to saying that Jesus was a migrant worker. It was an image that wouldn't fit easily with the Son of God.

Secondly, there is a recognition that the community lives in dangerous times – the risk of death and violence is there. Thieves, bandits, strangers and wolves threaten the flock. Yet, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the flock. Jesus will protect his flock.

And thirdly, it challenges the community to be welcoming of strangers – to be all encompassing. For people who lived in fear of persecution, this was a bold task to undertake. But they are told: there are more sheep, not of this fold. It challenges the church to be careful of where it makes boundaries. Too often the boundaries we make exclude the very ones whom God has called.

We miss the fullness of today's scriptures if we stay only with the image of the Good Shepherd that we see in stained glass windows and Sunday school lessons of our youth.

The Challenges

The Church in the 21st century needs to hear the depth of this gospel. We need to raise the questions of what threatens our life as a sheep of the fold. We need to understand what it means to live in such a way so that we are ready to lay down our life for another.

Joe Morris Doss, a former bishop in New Jersey, tells the story of a catechumen (an adult seeking Baptism) when he was rector of a church in Palo Alto, CA. The community would reflect with the catechumen about their life and ministry. It's a scary proposition because it raises questions for the whole community about their relationship with Jesus and their commitment to the gospel.

Joe was helping to prepare a family of five for baptism and they were entering Lent in the third year, and everyone expected them to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. However, the mother went to Joe and said she couldn't be baptized because she could not really say that she was ready to die for the gospel of Christ. The whole family decided to wait for a year and at the end of the next year she had answered her internal questions and they all were baptized. The question she raised reverberated through the community. Most people, including Joe, hadn't really examined if they were willing to die for the Gospel.

The greatest danger to the flock is that the faithful have become complacent consumers. We go to church when it fits into our schedule or when we feel like it. If other things don't interfere – a golf game, a soccer match, a late night on Saturday or when there is time for Church. Church only exists to meet our needs. Little is asked and little is given. We have a consumer mentality which says that we'll take what is appealing and leave the rest. We want to have Easter without Good Friday.

All too often we can see ourselves as self satisfied with what we have. We don't want to change anything, or to be challenged. We don't worry very much about growing, either personally or as a community. But the reality of the Easter event is that God is deeply desirous of relationship with us. God sent his Son so that we may have life. We are called into relationship with God in Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Relationships take time, communication, and trust. Today's collect talks about knowing the voice of Jesus when he calls. How do we discern when Jesus is speaking to us? Have we built up a personal relationship with Christ?

We understand that when we gather for liturgy we are gathering to be in conversation with God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It's what we do this morning, here in this place. Look at the prayers – do we know what we are saying and do we mean it – or are they just words? Do we carry on the conversation outside of Church in our daily life?

If we don't know how to carry on the conversation – where do you learn it? – and if you don't learn it, how will you build a relationship? How do we find the time in the hectic schedules of our life to silence our internal voices, the voices of all the would-of, could-of, should-ofs in our lives so that we can listen for the voice of God – the voice of assuring love in our lives?

I've been at this stuff for a long time. I can remember many years ago being in a conference where one of the attendees said: "Jesus played with the children and taught the adults, and yet the church has been doing the opposite ever since." Most of us think we should have learned all this stuff in Sunday School. We're embarrassed that we don't know how to look things up in the Bible or how to pray.

We think that somehow if we send our children to Church School they will be Christians. I'm here to tell you that in 45 minutes on Sunday morning we will not form mature Christians. Children learn to be Christians by watching their parents value their relationship with God. Children learn what is important by the priorities that parents give to activities. Children learn faithfulness by experiencing adults being faithful.

Actions

It's time we took seriously the need as adults to deepen our awareness of what it means to be a member of the flock. In a few weeks we are going to ask you, using a very short survey, what you need in order to deepen your relationship with God in Christ Jesus. I challenge you to take an honest account of your sense of intimacy and belonging in this flock of the faithful. Where do you need to grow and deepen your relationship with Jesus Christ?

Spirituality is another name for being in relationship with God. It is a relationship that continually needs to be nurtured in our prayer, in our actions, in the stewardship of our lives. How do we care for one another, for the earth, for those oppressed, for those in need? How do we use the resources and abundance that God has given us? How do my actions, my priorities, my commitments, speak to my relationship with the Good Shepherd? How do I reflect on my life in the light of the gospel? How do I know love? How do I lay down my life for another?

May God grant that when we hear his voice, we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads.