

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday April, 21, 2018 Easter 4B Good Shepherd Sunday  
Text John: 10  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Theme: The wideness of God's Love

This is Good Shepherd Sunday in the calendar of the church and because of that, we find ourselves reflecting on the pastoral imagery of a Shepherd and his sheep. If there is a piece of scripture that we may know by heart it is probably the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. As a child I learned it in the King James version, figuring if the King James translation was good enough for Jesus it was good enough for me.

The Lord is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul.

It is a psalm that is said at nearly every funeral.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil;  
For thou art with me;  
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

And who wouldn't like the end of the Shepherd's Psalm

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

A friend of mine once worked on a sheep farm in New Zealand. Soon after he arrived he was with the shepherd one afternoon. He climbed up on a fence and whistled to his sheep out on the other side of the pasture. I could see the ears of the sheep perk up. They all came trotting up to the shepherd.

We all know the importance of recognizing a trusted friend or leader. Many of us can identify the people in our lives whose voice calms us down. These are the people we call on the phone when we are troubled or stressed or worried or panicked because somehow, just the sound of their voice, the simple familiar tones, has a calming and healing effect upon us. For us as Christians in this peculiar and wonderful part of the Episcopal Church, I imagine that familiarity also extends to the words and rhythms and cadences of our Eucharistic Worship. I know for myself that there are words that I need to hear each week to know that the world is still aright: words like, "The gifts of God for the people of God, take them in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on them in your heart by faith with thanksgiving." "Send us now into the world in peace and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart."

It is not difficult to understand that we need to train ourselves to both hear and recognize the voice of Christ leading us that we may follow. Recognizing his voice is why we bother to read the scriptures, to worship together each week as a listening community, and why we dedicate ourselves to lives that include prayer, purposeful listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd in our inner lives.

Jesus says that he knows his sheep and they know him. In a way, you and I are gathered here this morning because, in one way or another, we have heard the voice of Christ calling us to himself, and in calling us to himself, Jesus has also called us together. One reason we've come to Christ is not only that we know him as the savior of the world but also that we believe that Christ is uniquely related to God the Father: "just as the Father knows me and I know the Father," Christ says.

It's not only that Jesus knows our name and we know Jesus, but we know him as the one who gives up his life for the sheep. This is the good shepherd, who not only ensures that the sheep are fed and protected from harm, but also loves them even to the point of self-sacrifice. Jesus is the one who, on the cross, loves the sheep even unto death. It is a strange and wonderful fact that long before Jesus was pictured hanging on a cross he was pictured as the good shepherd in the catacombs of Rome.

So, I suppose the message of this passage is pretty simple: Jesus is the Good Shepherd, our Good Shepherd.

And if that were the end of this week's assigned Gospel, then we could all take comfort and reassurance in these words. We need not fear. We have a good shepherd, the best of all shepherds, who loves us to death. It is a beautiful and comforting image, but the gospel writer does not stop there.

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd." John 10

What? It's one thing for the good shepherd to reassure us, to promise us that he will protect us and keep us. It is quite another thing for the good shepherd to say, in passing, "Oh, by the way, I've got other sheep who are not members of this fold. They will listen to my voice, and I'll lead them, too."

In the Book of Common Prayer there is a prayer in the burial office that alludes to this part of John's Gospel.

O God, the King of saints, we praise and glorify your holy Name for all your servants who have finished their course in your faith and fear: for the blessed Virgin Mary; for the holy patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs; **and for all your other righteous servants, known to us and unknown;** and we pray that, encouraged by their examples, aided by their prayers, and strengthened by their fellowship, we also may be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; through the merits of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

“They will listen to my voice,” Jesus says. His voice extends beyond the bounds of this congregation. I preach to you this morning, but might Jesus be preaching beyond the limits of my voice? We come here and worship in order to better hear the voice of Christ speaking to us, guiding us, revealing his truth to us. Might Jesus also be out in the world speaking to others whom we don’t know but whom he knows? I certainly hope so and believe it to be true.

That’s why it’s never enough for our church to be a warm, loving, caring fellowship of friends. As noble and wonderful an achievement as it is to be a loving, caring church, that’s not yet fully Christ’s church. Christ says that he is out talking to whomever he chooses. Christ’s designs are larger than the property line of this congregation. The love of God is so much bigger than we imagine it to be. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also.

What this says to me is that we ought to be inspired to go out from here and to join in with the good shepherd’s sheep-seeking work in the world. It’s not enough for us to have warm, loving communion with the good shepherd. We’ve got to find ways to have loving communion with those with whom the good shepherd has communion.

This is an expansive view of the work of the Christ, the work of the Good Shepherd. Jesus’s comments remind us that whether we go out and join with the seeking, searching shepherd in gathering his expansive flock, the shepherd will continue to seek and save.

John 10, with its image of the good shepherd, is the Gospel of John's counterpart to Luke 15. Jesus is criticized for receiving into fellowship and eating with "sinners." In response, Jesus tells some of his most memorable parables, including the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd has one sheep that wanders away from the pasture and becomes lost. So, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes and searches for the one lost sheep, and when he finds that sheep, he returns to the pasture rejoicing.

That must have been a jolt to the sensibilities of the ninety-nine stay-at-home sheep. The shepherd was so concerned with seeking and saving the one lost sheep that the shepherd risked the ninety-nine in order to retrieve the one lost sheep.

Christ is the good shepherd. Part of Christ's goodness is not only that he is good to us, those of us safe in the fold, but that he is also good to those outside this fold. Christ not only gives his life for us but for all. Christ has not only come into our lives but is coming into the lives of others.

A pastor named Tom Long repeatedly relates the story of a Sunday in his boyhood Presbyterian church in Georgia when a man in shabby clothes ambled into their church during the service. Perhaps he was a drifter passing through, or maybe he had jumped off a boxcar on the nearby tracks, up to no good, planning to prey on people while their guard was down at church.

All they knew for sure was that he wasn't one of them.

The ushers stepped aside as the stranger entered. He was handed a worship bulletin, but not graciously. He sat by himself on a pew toward the rear. Throughout the service, pastor and worshippers cast nervous glances in his direction, wondering how he might disrupt their worship. When the offering plates were passed, folks suspected that the stranger might take something out of the plate, rather than put something in. After listening to the sermon, the man arose and quietly departed.

Though Tom was a child at the time, he recalls that after service the Georgia farmers stood under the big oak in the churchyard, talking in serious, muted tones.

“They probably didn’t know how to say it,” says Tom, “but everyone knew that God had put our church to a test. And we had flunked.”

Tom so frequently retells this story because he knows that it’s at the heart of what it means to be Christ’s best friends and, at the same time, his most disappointing betrayers.

In presenting our church with sisters and brothers whom we fear as the Other, God is not only testing us but giving us a gracious opportunity to recover the adventure of discipleship. By the grace of God and the ministrations of the church, we are enabled to have better lives than if Christ had left us to our own devices.

**One of our core values at St. Mark’s is to be a radically welcoming congregation.** We want our church to be

permeable to newcomers, open to those who are searching, seeking a community, or just wandering around wondering what it is all about. We want to be a place where people feel that they can belong without having to pass some litmus test or prove their worth. We want to emulate the Good Shepherd, to be a place that is actually open to the Other. But it is actually not all that easy to live that way. I don't know how well we do this. I would like to say, "Hey, you are doing great! This is a really welcoming community; it's warm and inviting and safe." And I think that a lot of times that is correct and that enables people to come in and be fed by worship that is at the center of our lives, to build meaningful relationships that encourage their spiritual growth, to find places of ministry and growth. The challenge is that the Good Shepherd is always pushing us out of our comfort zone, always asking us to search out and invite those who are not here, those for whom the church is an unfamiliar soil, a place full of odd rituals and strange words. What draws people to the love of God is love, the loving care of Christ's followers in the world reaching out their arms of love just as Jesus did.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd and that is a gracious gift that we all are the beloved recipients of, but receiving a gift comes with a responsibility to emulate that loving care of the Good Shepherd in the world around us so that others may come within the reach of God's saving embrace.

There has been a lot of speculation on the identity of these other sheep from John's gospel. Such speculation misses the

point. *God's love is broader than we can imagine and includes those we can't imagine.*

May we not only follow the Good Shepherd but be found to be in his likeness more and more.