

A Homily by  
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“Shepherd–sheep relationship”  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
April 21, 2013

This Sunday the church focuses on Jesus as the Good Shepherd. As a child this was called Good Shepherd Sunday. In all three years of the revised common lectionary on this Sunday we hear of Jesus being the good shepherd all from John's gospel.

Today I want you to set aside much of what I have taught from this pulpit about shepherds and sheep. I have painted shepherds as outcasts, as some of the lowest in 1<sup>st</sup> century society. And I have often represented sheep as easily influenced not so bright creatures of God. There are very few references to real sheep in the Bible, but then of course, we are the sheep. And being represented as smelly unruly dumb creatures is not so flattering. But our Lord so often turns our understanding of the world upside down. SO let's take a fresh look at the Shepherd–sheep relationship.

On this Sunday in the season of Easter, I want us embrace a new understanding of our being sheep who belong to Jesus the Good Shepherd. Let us think of new images of sheep and shepherds. One picture I will carry always in my mind of a perfect sheep is from our last Christmas pageant when Eric placed a jolly lamb crawling and scampering on all fours down the centre aisle towards the baby Jesus in his manger crib. That lamb was seeking the shepherd. We often think of Jesus seeking after the one lost sheep, but we too must seek our Lord. And Christmas last, the sheep sought the Good Shepherd. And I want us to do so again today.

The symbol of a shepherd that comes to my mind most often is a Bishop being our shepherd. And our bishop's carry shepherd's hook or crozier. Bishop Greg often carries a common shepherd's crook that he ordered from a supplier in England. It is made of chestnut and cost under \$100 (His other more formal crozier is made of black cherry.). The shepherd's crook or crozier is a symbol of the bishop's pastoral office, just as the stole is a symbol of a priest's office. Real sheep need prodding and poking from time to time, hence the picture of a shepherd who may need to use the rod and staff to guide the

sheep. Just so we need to be guided onto the right paths – to be moved along in our faith. Haven't we all felt God ever so gently – or perhaps not so gently – always moving us along on our journeys however rocky and uneven the road might be?

I believe that it is no accident that the Good Shepherd readings fall at this time of the year. It is lambing season. The average gestation period for sheep is around five months. So since the beginning of this church year in Advent it has been the shepherd's duty to ensure that the sheep are cared for, that their nutritional needs are met, and that they come to a safe place for lambing. The ewes must be well fed to produce a good healthy lamb. They must have enough body fat in reserve to produce milk and be fit to raise their lambs.

Lambs must get enough milk, and this begins right at birth. To survive they must be fed at once. An intriguing part of lambing comes into play when a mother sheep dies or when a ewe does not have enough milk to cope with two lambs. Sadly there is often a ewe who has lost her lamb and one who is desperate for another, but she will not allow another lamb near her. A good shepherd will skin the dead lamb and place it – like a coat – on the hungry lamb. Recognizing the scent of her own baby, the mother will take the lamb and feed it. The adopted lamb will wear the coat for a few days until the mother takes to it as if it were her own.

Another image that comes to my mind whenever I think of our Lord as the Good Shepherd is a new one. Last year Bryon, our choir director introduced us to a sweet sweet hymn that he and Ardyth used in their marriage service. Now "Gentle Shepherd" as become a standard hymn we sing often as a communion hymn.

Gentle Shepherd come and lead us  
For we need you to help us find our way  
Gentle Shepherd come and feed us  
For we need your strength from day to day.

A good shepherd leads the sheep to water to drink and Jesus offers living waters so that we will never thirst. A good shepherd leads the sheep to good pastures to feed

sometimes through difficult terrain (and times) to get to a place of safety. We often lose our way on our journeys, but the right path is still there. But we need Jesus, the good shepherd, to help us find our way.

The pastoral image of sheep running in beautiful green fields in temperate climates is a lovely image, indeed, but it is in sharp contrast to the harshness of the Judean hills. It took a shepherd messiah to restore the lost sheep of Israel. So a shepherd was sent to be more than pastor – to reveal the reign of God with all the political, social, and personal dimensions that that entails.

Yes, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who uses his muscle to poke and prod us along on our journeys, and Jesus is the Good Shepherd who uses his intellect seek and find the best way to feed us when we have lost our mother, and Jesus is the Good Shepherd who uses his skill and experience in shepherding to find a place where our lambs can be delivered in safety. But the Good Shepherd's greatest strength is his voice. He calls us by name. And we are invited to follow. Unlike the thief or robber who comes in stealth and silence, Jesus's sheep hear his voice.

Do we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? Do we understand fully, as humanly possible, where that voice is leading us? My friends, if we know the voice of the Good Shepherd then we will one day experience what may be found at the end of our journey – eternal life. But along the road we may be faced with wolves – false teachers. The Good Shepherd laid down his life to protect the flock against those wolves. And so, since we have been sought out by the Good Shepherd and since we too have sought the Good Shepherd like the lamb in the Christmas pageant, we cannot be snatched away – not ever – not in this time or in the time of eternal life.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.