

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10:11-16

September 6, 2009

Our scripture this morning has been the subject of many an artist's musing on both canvas and on paper. It touches a deep place of need in us, an image of being cared for, looked after, protected.

"I Am the Good Shepherd," Jesus proclaimed.

When we hear these words, we are transported to a place of serenity, a pastoral landscape beside still waters running through green pastures. We are wrapped in a bucolic blanket of warm summer rest, feeling safe from all harm.

"I Am the Good Shepherd," Jesus said.

We picture him holding his lambs much like we do when we go to a petting zoo and see those cute balls of woolly fluff—and guess what, we are the cute balls of woolly fluff—the sheep of his pastures. Aren't we his darlings?

"I Am the Good Shepherd," Jesus said.

I hate to disabuse us of this wonderful image we've received through many years of tradition, but this statement, more than any of the first three "I Am" statements we've studied thus far, is the most challenging, earth-shaking statement Jesus made to that point in his ministry—and it continues to challenge us today.

First, Jesus was anywhere but a pastoral landscape when he first uttered his 4th "I Am" statement. Speaking to a crowd of disciples interspersed with his detractors in the courtyard of a very busy temple in Jerusalem, Jesus' voice boomed out, "I Am the Good Shepherd."

If ever there was a jaw dropping, eye-widening, neck-hair raising word spoken, this was it. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph had been referred to as (in all capital letters) The Good Shepherd.

When King David wrote his most famous hymn, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," he was singing his praise to God. The Lord God Almighty was the Good Shepherd—and there was no other.

So imagine the shocked looks on the faces of disciple and Pharisee alike that day in the temple courtyard when Jesus all but said, "I Am God."

If we had read further in our scripture today, we would have heard the expected murmuring in Verse 19 which reported "There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, 'He has a demon, and he is mad; why listen to him?' Others said, 'These are not the sayings of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'"

Jesus continued to electrify with his words in verse 27, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Well that did it—in verse 31 we hear that the Jewish detractors took up stones again to stone him. Still, with a word, Jesus stopped them. "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?"

Jesus' reminder of his miraculous touch, his healing hands and heart caused them to drop their rocks to the ground and go away—this time.

But still he shocked them to their very core.

"I Am the Good Shepherd," Jesus proclaimed.

But the most shocking thing of all was yet to come. The very last report we get from the gospel of John is the resurrected Jesus asking, "Peter, do you love me?" Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know I do." "Then feed my lambs" Two more times Peter answers affirmatively to Jesus' question, and two more times Jesus says, "then tend my lambs, Feed my sheep."

From Peter on, those who are servant leaders in the church have taken a kind of Shepherds Oath of Office, even calling ourselves “pastors”—Latin for the word “shepherd.” The Pope carries as a symbol of his office a shepherd’s crook, signifying the words from the Shepherds Psalm—‘Thy rod and thy staff—they comfort me.’

Those called into ministry of the church of Jesus Christ are, for the most part, good shepherds—at least we try to be.

Are there any bad shepherds? Certainly in this morning’s scripture Jesus warns about them—those who are hired hands who see a wolf coming and run away, leaving the sheep vulnerable to attack.

And of course, each one of us could tell a story of one of the pastoral shepherds that even attacked their own flock. Like the two television evangelists that were talking over lunch one day. One was explaining how he was seeking to be the ideal shepherd to his television flock. “There are three ways I seek to do that,” he said.

“What three ways do you mean?” asked the other evangelist.

“Well” he explained, “First, we FIND them. Every year we find new stations to carry our ministry. Then we FEED them. I give them the plain unvarnished word of God.”

“But what’s the third thing?” asked the second evangelist.

“Well,” he answered, “Once we’ve found them and fed them, then we FLEECE them!” (King Duncan)

Truthfully, I wonder if the men and women from Mexico who herd human flocks secretly over the borders are not more honest when they call themselves not “shepherds” but “coyotes”—predators that prey on the most vulnerable.

There have been plenty of “coyotes” masquerading in sheep’s clothing when it comes to those called into ministry. So much so that I’ve wanted to put away

the shepherd's crook at times and just claim my place as one of the sheep. After all, I'm just as much a follower of Jesus as anybody else in his flock.

But again, that image is not all we've been brought up to think it is. One Sunday morning, following the church service, a layman accosted his pastor and said, "Tom, this church has been insulting me for years, and I did not know it until this week." The stunned pastor replied, "What on earth do you mean?"

"Well," said the layman, "every Sunday morning the call to worship in this church ends with the words, 'We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.' And I have heard ministers over the years call the congregation, 'God's flock.' Then this past week I visited the Chicago stockyards. There I discovered that sheep are just about the dumbest animals God ever created. Why, they are so stupid that they even follow one another docilely into the slaughterhouse. Even pigs are smarter than sheep, and I would certainly be angry if my church called me a pig' every Sunday morning. So I'm not at all sure I want to come to church and be called a sheep any longer...even God's sheep'."

He's right! Sheep are not the sharpest tacks on the animal bulletin board. And even though they wash up well when they are lambies for petting zoos, they grow up to be smelly, dirty creatures. Their wool develops this oily substance that causes everything to stick to them.

For the most part, sheep are herd animals. But the problem is that they have no real leader. They'll follow each other at a whim, even following one another off a cliff if that's the direction they're all heading.

Of course, there are a few independent ones who go off on their own, but again, they have no real way to protect themselves, so the lost sheep end up usually coming to a bad end.

That doesn't sound like us, does it? Most of us smell pretty good. True, we tend to flock together in communities and neighborhoods. But we never follow the herd mindlessly, do we? We never follow another sheep that doesn't know where he or she is going, do we? None of us ever wanders away from the herd into danger, do we?

No, if I don't want to carry a shepherd's staff, I certainly don't know if I want to be considered one of the sheep.

However, if the wool fits, I guess we've got to wear it.

All week long as I've been wrestling with this whole health care debate, I've been thinking how like sheep we all are—mindlessly following on the right side of the fence the loud voices of Rush Limbaugh and Fox News; or from the left side of the fence the loud voices of Keith Oberman and MSNBC. We don't think for ourselves—or do the study we need to do. We are fed on vitriol and hate speech. Our cup does not runneth over with goodness and mercy.

The truth is, we really need The Good Shepherd. There is really only one Good Shepherd, the one who we believe was God Incarnate.

How do we know it is The Good Shepherd who calls out to us?

Because at some point, the ear of our soul hears a voice calling out to us, calling us by name,

Our good Shepherd comes to us when we are smelly and dirty with the grime of the world

and holds us closely;

Our Good Shepherd comes to us when we are hurting

and touches us with a healing love that mends all wounds;

Our Good Shepherd comes to us when we are wandering, lost,

and leads us to the fold of his presence, where we are safe at home;

Our Good Shepherd comes to us when we are hungry and thirsty,

and feeds us beside the still waters of a world that is filled with abundance.

And once we are whole, and restored, and filled, he calls to us again,

each by our own unique, individual name,

like he did with Peter—"Deborah, _____, do you love me? Then come, follow me feed my sheep—yes, I know they are smelly, ditzy, and stubbornly lost. And they are precious, precious lambs of mine. Not just some of them, mind you, but all of them!"

And so we follow where he leads us--past the pool of Silome where we are called to reach out to touch in prayer those who are physically ill and need healing;

He leads us past Jacob's well where those who are outcast are getting water at mid-day, where we are called to reach out and offer hope to those like the Samaritan woman who had been divorced more than what was proper and was living in sin with her current partner.

He leads us into our crowded world, and calls us to feed with loaves and fishes, even though it seems impossible to think we have enough to provide everyone what they need to survive.

And finally, He then leads us to a cross, where we are called to sacrifice for the sake of others. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," he says.

There is only one Good Shepherd, and we believe he is the Son of God, our Lord and Savior.

May we be sheep that follow the sound of his voice—for it can be, and always be been, and always will be, trustworthy. Amen.