

4th Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Psalm 23

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

John 10:1-10

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

I love Episcopalians. One of the many reasons I love this denomination is that they have a very humorous presence on my Facebook feed. If you haven't already, you should definitely follow "Episcopal Church Memes" on Facebook. Often humorous and always theologically sound, they post pictures, memes, and cartoons that often revolve around the topics given to us on a weekly basis courtesy of the Revised Common Lectionary.

Not surprisingly then, I saw a perfect cartoon show up on my Facebook page regarding today's passage from the Gospel of John. It depicts a sheep lounging about in the middle of a green field. He has his headphones attached to his iPod, sound is blaring simultaneously from a television, laptop, and radio. With his Bible cast to the side as the sheep picks up the latest issue of "Sheep Digest," he says to himself, "I wonder why I don't hear from the Shepherd anymore!" Off in the distance is a shepherd in a futile attempt to call to his beloved sheep.

Oh dear. So very, very true. We often are our own biggest obstacles when it comes to listening to the voice of the Shepherd.

I am reminded of one of my first thoughts about Shelter Island when I was first introduced to this bizarre little island. As I have admitted before, I was like most people who are introduced to Shelter Island for the first time, I had to google it to learn where in the world it was when I first heard about it. When I saw its beautiful location, full of serene beaches and a third of the island a nature preserve, I assumed that the people of Shelter Island must have a pretty laid-back existence. Surely, I thought, they were a people who, more than most others, understood the importance of sabbath and relaxation, of quiet and stillness.

Now, some of us get that pretty well. It is not my intention to make sweeping generalizations. However, I must share something I have observed in my almost three years of being among you. And it is this: y'all are *really* busy! Shelter Islanders are some of the busiest people I have ever met. Traveling here and there, participating in no less than 17 island organizations. I often joke about how if you ask a Shelter Islander what she or he "does," you had better make sure that you have no where to go for about 45 minutes. Shelter Islanders are people of many talents and passions. This, in and of itself, is NOT a bad thing. It is one of the many beautiful things about this small island that we call home.

However, are there not moments when we are guilty of being "that" sheep? You know, the one who can't hear the desperate cries of the Shepherd because of everything else that he feels needs to be done and seen and experienced and consumed. Sometimes we have to be forced to slow down because us sheep can be very stubborn.

As many of you know, I recently returned from about nine days on the road, combining three different events that just so happened to align rather conveniently. The last of these events was a 5 day retreat called EMI, which stands for Early Ministry Institute. This is my second year being part of the three-year program for pastors in the first years of their first call. We gathered in Stony Point (just north of the City) for worship, fellowship, quiet, networking, with much laughter and many tears.

I had come to this place of retreat after a very busy couple of days. On Wednesday, I had a four hour long meeting with a committee I'm on that has original jurisdiction of Newark Presbytery. Then, on Friday and Saturday, I drove up to Albany for our secondly quarterly meeting of the Synod of the Northeast's Mission and Ministry Commission where I moderated a nearly five hour long meeting concerning the money we are investing in missional communities around the Northeast. Whew! I was tired.

By the time I got to Stony Point for EMI, I was feeling particularly drained by the daily grind of being a pastor. I must confess, a sabbath for me was LONG overdue. My mindset was still in the pragmatic, details obsessed place of getting things done and conquering the long list of things that needed to be done or else the world would surely stop turning!

After a meaningful worship during orientation, we simply sat among one another in silence for about 10 minutes. We sang. We prayed. And then we went to our small groups to vent and complain and rejoice and support one another in the difficult work that we are called to do as pastors.

After an emotionally intense two hour long session of simply bearing our hearts out to one another, one of our groups leaders asked us to close our eyes in prayer and imagine that Jesus walked into the room and was sitting right next to us. She told us to imagine that Jesus was bending over to whisper something into our ears. What would he say to you? she asked.

I thought for a second about what the Shepherd would say to this particular sheep known as Stephen M. Fearing. Would he pull out a proverb with timeless wisdom in it? Would he give me a secret that would allow me to double the size of this congregation in six months? Would he dictate a treatise to me that would remove all complications from my life? Would he interpret to me the work of the prophets and all those weird parts of the Bible that I struggle to understand?

I sat there waiting for the ground-breaking, world shattering message that the Shepherd would give me.

And then he spoke. What I'm about to say to you might sound cheesy or wishy-washy but I'll tell you the truth nevertheless. A voice spoke to me. It was not my voice. It was another voice that would be impossible for me to describe to you. However, I can assure you it was not mine. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leaned over and said three simple words to me: "I love you."

In my mind, I turned to Jesus and said, "that's it?" And then I got it. "It" was exactly what I needed to hear. And it just so happened that it came in a moment of quiet that can be all too hard to achieve in our busy lives. Sometimes, words of love can be drowned out in the deluge of daily life.

Lately, I've been fascinated by the second verse of Psalm 23. Notice, the verse does not say "he suggests that I lie down in green pastures." It does not say "he strongly invites me to lie down in green pastures." It says, "he *makes* me lie down in green pastures."

Sometimes, we need to be forced to slow down and hear the loving word of the Good Shepherd. It is not something that comes intuitively to most of us. I suppose that's why God built a day of sabbath into the rhythm of each and every week of our lives. However, I would be very embarrassed to admit the number of weeks that I have not taken God up on God's abundant offer for self-care.

We need sabbath, we need quiet, we need to hear the still voice of the Good Shepherd by green pastures and still waters because there is a lot of noise "out there." Today's gospel passage reminds us that there are many voices in the world. One voice says that you don't have enough. Another says that you don't do enough. Yet another says that you yourself *are not enough*.

But there's another voice that reminds us that we are enough just the way we are. This voice knows this to be true because the God who whispers it is the very God that created us and called us "good." Perhaps you need to hear that voice whispering "you are enough, I love you." Or perhaps you see someone who needs to hear that voice themselves. Perhaps God is speaking to you to speak that word of love and "enough" to them.

So, your homework assignment for the week is as follows: carve out 8 hours this week to be still. I promise you can do it if you recognize how important it is that you do it. It might mean saying no to something. It might mean admitting publicly that you are in need of rest. It might mean admitting to

yourself that there is a deep and beautiful part of you that cannot be fulfilled by anything that comes from you but only from God's still voice. Go on a walk. Sit on the beach. Listen to music. Read your bible. Put away the to-do list. Forget, for a few hours, about being "productive" and "efficient" (and you might just find a different kind of productivity and efficiency).

So, friends, be kind to one another. Be kind to yourself! Listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd and do not be swayed by the endless sea of voices that seek to rip us from his loving arms. The green pastures and still waters are waiting for you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.