

Jesse Perkins
Saturday, April 28, 2012
Modified Friday, April 20, 2018
Year B, Easter 4

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

“The Flock of God”

- Today is informally considered Good shepherd Sunday
 - And that’s because for centuries the lessons today have mentioned sheep and culminated with the gospel reading depicting Jesus as the Good Shepherd
 - Truthfully, I do not know much about shepherds-
 - It is an occupation whose subtleties probably elude most of us here today
 - Also, I am not sure how I feel being compared to a sheep... we’ve all heard those sermons
 - Being compared to a sheep who blindly follows is not a compliment.
 - I did recently see some sheep, and probably a goat or two, in Guatemala
 - Near the place where we were building the house, a women watched over a very small flock of less than 5 I would say
 - They were eating on the side of a hill,
 - And I just stood there and watched, soaking it all in and taking a few pictures
 - The sheep and goats looking at me as curiously, but kept eating without a care in the world
 - There is great comfort in thinking of Jesus as a shepherd and us in this content and happy flock
 - Jesus as someone who leads, cares, and even risks his life for the sheep- our protector from the threats and dangers in this world
 - But that’s not all that this Sunday’s readings gives us- not just comfort and reassurance, not just a pastoral scene on a hillside
 - This Gospel, coupled with the other readings, also presents us with what I think is a challenging view of God and God’s kingdom

- One that is bigger than we often think possible, and ever trying to expand our understanding of God’s work in the world
- To begin, we have one of the most familiar passages of scripture in the Bible as our Gospel today
 - Jesus as the “good” Shepherd, or also translated the “model” shepherd¹, or ideal shepherd
 - The Shepherd that all should be like, the one that does it all right.
 - The ideal shepherd cares for the sheep, is invested in the sheep, unlike a hired hand.
 - Even willing to risk life and limb to protect the sheep when danger comes.
 - The difference between the hired hand and the shepherd is contrasted further when Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, is even willing to die for the sheep
 - The sheep recognize the shepherd, obey his or her command
 - They even consider the shepherd as a part of the family. ²
 - Sheep have their challenges: they have no depth perception, so dark areas and water make it harder for them to perceive accurately their surroundings³
 - Sheep prefer to be led and will follow their shepherd, unlike cattle for instance which are prodded and pushed from behind.
 - Which gives them the reputation for being dumb and hard to deal with
 - They also work better when calm, so if they are anxious or scared you will have a lot of trouble with them.
 - In fact, according to some pieces I found about sheep, if you stand behind a herd of sheep and make noises at them
 - They will simply run around and stand behind you.⁴
 - The connection between the sheep and shepherd is deep, and sheep are not near as dumb as they have been made out to be over the years

¹ Sarah S. Henrich, *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Volume 2, 451

² Nancy R. Blakely, *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Volume 2, 450

³ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter4b>

⁴ Rev. Lisa Erdeljon

- Sheep can remember 50 faces for two years, that is fifty faces of either people or other sheep⁵
- They form friendships, can help weaker colleagues, and even build loyalty
- Perhaps you've even seen the youtube video⁶ where the shepherds put battery powered Christmas lights on the sheep
- Then with complex commands tell the sheep and sheep dogs to draw out things on the hillside at night- it's amazing!
- The Shepherds create still pictures, animated fireworks, and even a game of Pong, all using flocks of sheep with lights on their backs.
- Try getting a cow, or even a dog, to do that!
- Just from that short, low quality video on youtube, it is easy to see the relationship between a shepherd and their sheep is complex.
- Jesus, as the ideal shepherd, knows his sheep intimately.
- Risks himself by going after one if it gets lost.
- This mutual investment is what I find amazing when it comes to our relationship to God
- We know we need God, we know we are lost and without hope without our shepherd
- But our relationship with God is not one sided. It is more intimate than that.
- Jesus talks about a shepherd who chooses to be among the sheep almost as if they are his family
- Leading, protecting- loving and caring. Connecting to them.
- Reaching out as far as necessary to include even the most lost sheep
- Jesus is saying something about God's love, and God's desire for us.
- If God is inter-connected with the flock, risking to retrieve even the most lost of the group
 - The question that always arises is, "who is in the flock?"
 - Who is a part of the group for which Jesus will risk everything to find?
 - The disciples struggled with this same question, and Peter seems determined to draw a black and white line around the flock
 - It is an easy temptation for all of us
 - Peter, in his joy of spreading the good news that is found in Jesus, tells us that salvation is found in no one else

⁵ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter4b>

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGOGOxtN2IM>

- And while I agree with Peter theologically here, it is unfortunate that over time, this has been interpreted very narrowly
- Rather than being a piece of scripture that expands God's kingdom, it has often been a weapon to be used against anyone not like us
- From the crusades to the Native Americans, from LGBT to Muslims, those whom we decide are not in the flock end up having no value
- And that flies in the face of what the Good Shepherd Sunday is all about
- If you remember, Peter also goes on later to want to restrict the flock to just Jews and not Gentiles, an even smaller definition of the flock
 - Which caused a conflict between him and Paul
- Now Peter was not a bad guy, but he did fall into an easy trap of limiting God's work to only what we could understand
- I would like to suggest that Peter, and you and I, hear what Jesus says:
 - Jesus says there are other sheep out there that we do not know about
- Jesus said this long before he died and rose again- it is no post-resurrection miraculous appearance
- There is a lot more going on here than we or the disciples know
- Somehow other people knew about Jesus even while Jesus was walking on this earth
- Think about that... On the one hand it seems amazing, that Jesus would have a flock that had not met him in person
- On the other hand, of course Jesus was known in other places, other flocks...
- This was the Word made Flesh, the Word spoken at creation, the Word that permeates all of creation through out time
- How could he not be known?
- There's a lesson here, I think, one that Jesus perhaps wanted the disciples to learn
- That we do not get to define the flock, who is in and who is out. That is up to the shepherd.
- Too often I think we find ourselves right there with Peter.
- We experience God in one way, and assume that God only then works that one way
- Instead of being surprised by all the varied places and ways in which God is reaching out to all of creation,
- We are quick to denounce it.

- What I am convinced of is this: that God has a lot more going on than I am aware of
- God works in ways and in places that go beyond our understanding.
- God's flock is larger than my simple understanding and experience
- Thanks be to God
- Good Shepherd Sunday tells us of a big, inclusive flock that pushes us to think bigger about God's work
 - It tells us of Jesus as the perfect shepherd, illustrating God's love for us and all humankind
 - But it does not stop there.
 - First John says we should also live out of this example, mirroring the shepherd
 - Love is known and proven through action rather than words, it says
 - It resembles the love of a Shepherd for the sheep, one of relationship, reciprocity, and self-sacrifice
 - Giving of ourselves to those who need our help
 - This type of love is not easy, and it is sacrificial.
 - It is hard to know when to say yes, and when to say no
 - It is ongoing, and never complete.
 - Yet it is the standard to which we have been called.
 - God's challenge to us, the challenge to love like Jesus in a way that is ever expanding and inclusive
 - To be like sheep who help other sheep as best as we can.
- Finally, if there is one message within our lessons today that we need to hear over and over again
 - It's this- God loves us. Really and truly.
 - And that love is not limited to a small group of humanity, but extended to all.
 - It is more than the love of a good shepherd and sheep.
 - More than pets and owners, or even family.
 - God's love is not conditional, it is not because we earned it, it is not because of who we are
 - It is because of who God is.
 - Almost sounds cliché, doesn't it? We have heard it so much and for so long
 - Sometimes it just rolls off and does not sink in.
 - When we are walking through the shadow of death, when we are anxious or afraid, we doubt it.

- We think we may be too far outside of the flock to be rescued.
- That maybe we are not worth it to the shepherd who surely has many other good sheep to worry about...
- But that is not who the Good Shepherd is, not the God that Jesus wants to tell us about
- And while I stop short of trying to define who is NOT in the flock, I can assure you that each of you are in it.
- That is the hope of Good Shepherd Sunday- that we each are recipients of God's love ever reaching love.
- We are one of the sheep, and maybe that's not such a bad thing after all
- We are to follow the shepherd, imitate the shepherd, and even care for one another, as sheep can do
- And we can take great hope i knowing that God's goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives
- And we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.