

“Hearing your Shepherd”

- Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, and for many centuries has been informally called Good Shepherd Sunday
 - It has embedded itself into our religious culture and Tradition, with Jesus describing himself as the Good Shepherd of the Sheep
 - And us hearing and following our shepherd
 - Perhaps in this tradition is a dose of good humility for us, seeing ourselves as sheep
 - Rather than the powerful, in control, self-determined people we love to imagine
 - For a while this morning I want us to lean into that- to imagine ourselves more like sheep than powerful people.
 - What can be learned there?
 - Leading up to this week, I happened across a fantastic video on Facebook (of course)- a meme about Good Shepherd Sunday
 - This stuff happens a lot when you are friends with many other clergy around the country, most of who are preparing to preach that week
 - This particular video said that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has to shepherd me like this: ¹
 - And the video was a poor lamb stuck in a ditch.
 - It looked like the ditch was dug for a pipe of some kind, so it was deep and narrow
 - And of course the lamb had gotten down in there, its hips and shoulders keeping it suspended in the ditch with no hope of getting out
 - Poor thing- just stuck there, suspended face down, staring into the deep, and all four feet dangling
 - Probably screaming its head off, although there was no sound
 - The shepherd, a regular looking guy, reached down and grabbed it by one of its hind legs

¹ <https://fb.watch/51lzxAoMro/>

- And began to gently but firmly pull it up and out. For a brief moment of unpleasantness, one leg was up and being pulled
- And soon the whole body was freed
- The lamb went nuts with excitement, and began leaping with joy at the newfound freedom
- Leaping and jumping, and... yup, jumped right back into the same ditch a few feet away
- Landing in the exact same position- stuck dangling, and again needing some help
- The Good Shepherd has to shepherd me like this, it says, and I admit that has a lot of truth in it.
- This famous and deeply rooted passage about the shepherd comes from the Gospel of John- the only gospel to include this saying from Jesus
 - Jesus as the “good” Shepherd, or also translated the “model” shepherd², 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.
 - Will pull a sheep out of a ditch repeatedly!
 - But is also 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. ³
 - Sheep have their challenges: they have no depth perception, so dark areas and water make it harder for them to perceive accurately their surroundings⁴
 - Thus those pesky ditches
 - 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

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

³ Nancy R. Blakely, *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Volume 2, 450

⁴ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter4b>

- They also work better when calm, so if they are anxious or scared you will have a lot of trouble with them.
- 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
- 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
 - I think I have mentioned it before- there's a link in the sermon notes
- The shepherds instruct 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.
- 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.
- And the sheep- they know his touch, his care, and his voice
- I admit, it is a little humbling to think of myself as a sheep
 - But oh goodness, I will admit there is truth there. It can be a helpful thought exercise
 - Without a shepherd we are not very capable
 - But with a shepherd, we can do quite a bit
 - The problem, I think, is that there are a lot voices out there that want to be our shepherd
 - So my fellow sheep... which shepherd are we hearing? Which one do we listen to?
 - Because as sheep, we will almost always find a voice and follow it, sometimes to destructive ends
 - There are voices out there telling us to live only for ourselves- that no one else really matters

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

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

- To look after number 1 even at the expense of others around us, and at the expense of our planet
- Jesus says, love your neighbor. And your neighbor is the person you see in need.
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- There are plenty of voices out there willing to tell us that some other group of people somewhere are less deserving and less important than we are
- That we are the special ones
- We see that one all the time- whether it is nationality, race, gender, hair color- not too long ago it was which hand you write with
- We can always hear a false shepherd out there telling us it is ok to hate and hurt another person for some reason
 - Or that we do not have to care about someone in certain situations and circumstances...
 - And they can be convincing.
 - But it is not the voice of the Good Shepherd.
- For God so loved the whole world... and Jesus says, there are sheep in the fold that you don't even know about...
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- We can hear a destructive shepherd telling us about a prosperity Gospel, that God just wants us to be rich, comfortable, and happy
- And other voices offering safety and security, but at a terrible cost of gun violence and oppression of people deemed threatening
- There are voices hoping that we will listen, to tell us that we are not good enough, not worthy, not redeemable
- None of these voices are the voice of the Good Shepherd.
- So what voice gets our attention? To which voice do we hear?
 - Just briefly, let's look at Acts: we can see a clash of several voices here as Peter defends himself before the Jewish leadership
 - It is so important for us to see this not as an indictment upon the Jews- that is reckless interpretation
 - But instead see this as a commentary on the whole of humanity.
 - Any group of people in power and enjoying privilege, and then who perceives another group of people threatening that somehow
 - This confrontation can- and does- happen.
 - The powerful bring Peter before them and start asking some questions

- Now all Peter had done was heal a lame man⁷... All of this fuss was about a good thing that had happened
- But just like when Jesus started healing and teaching, a crowd followed
- And now this Jesus movement was numbering about 5000⁸
- And now the powerful were worried about their futures
- You can tell because of the question they ask: “By what power or by what name did you do this?”
- When did you become powerful instead of us? And how?
- They were not following the voice of the God of love
- But Peter names it- the voice of the Good Shepherd is the voice of Jesus Christ
- The one that lays down his life for us, for the sheep, who loved God and his sheep more than his own life
- The one, we hear in 1 John, who calls us to do the same- to love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action
- That’s when you know you are hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd-
- When it compels you to love even more, to reach out and help even more
- To serve and give and care and love even more, even when the people we should love scare us, threaten us, or cause us anxiety
- Peter says, no other name is given whereby we can be saved
- And instead of thinking that means only Christians can be saved... or only Christians that think and look like you are gonna make it
- I say that whenever we hear and follow the voice that calls us to greater love,
- We are following Christ, whether we name it that way or not
- We live at a time when there are many voices calling us to follow
 - Many voices tempting us to close our minds to others, shut out the cries of those in need
 - To forbid water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, or human decency to those who ask for our help
 - There are voices tempting us into a dull haze of comfort and apathy when others are being oppressed

⁷ Thomas G. Long, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 2, Pastoral Perspective, p. 432

⁸ Paul W. Walaskay, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 2, Exegetical Perspective, p. 431

- And voices that want us to be scared and hide inside our metaphorical caves
- But there is also a voice whispering to us today- a voice that calls us to love, and love big, love in ways that cost us
- Love against the grain, to people some may say do not deserve it
- Love in ways that cause trouble
- There is a voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd, that calls us to love ourselves because we are worth it
- And love ourselves so that we are able to then love others even more
- With the Good Shepherd, my fellow sheep, we can do a whole lot of good in this world
- Anything else, anything short of love, will lead us right into the ditch.
- Are you hearing the Good Shepherd this morning?

Amen.