

Easter4_YrB_042615_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

Good morning! Well, as you have probably noticed by now, today is what is known unofficially as "Good Shepherd Sunday" - the fourth Sunday of Easter. Unlike most readings in our liturgical year, which are only repeated every third year of the cycle, Shepherd Sunday happens EVERY year - A, B or C - and, although the readings differ, the subject is still shepherds and...that's right...sheep. We read psalms about sheep, we sing about sheep and we declare ourselves to be sheep. And ...this is the fifth time in six years that I am preaching on Sheep Day!

So you would think that I would be proficient in that by now, but I am still somewhat hesitant to speak as if I really understand the metaphor that John uses in his Gospel to describe Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I mean, how many of you here have grown up around sheep, or are familiar with the care and feeding of said fuzzy animals?

I have learned about sheep through reading various articles. They are wanderers, not very bright, sometimes contentious, great followers in need of leadership. But that's not the picture the Church - and Hallmark - have created to make sheep objects of our affection. Don't we all know that ubiquitous Sunday school picture of a really pale Jesus with a sort of doe-eyed look and a tiny lamb around his shoulders? Or the pictures of cute, bouncy, little lambs with CLEAN bright, curly wool hopping about in a bright green pasture?

Well, the only real sheep I have ever 'met' were much too large to pick up, much less put over your shoulders, with dirty wool and bits of grass, weeds and sticks matted in it. And they smell like - well, like dirty, wet wool smells! Not so great!

So, it has been a little discouraging to not be able to find a more modern example to use instead of sheep and their shepherd! After all, we probably know even less about shepherds than we do about sheep. And we would be hard-pressed to be able to tell the difference between a good shepherd and a bad one. But Jesus was not someone who was a shepherd by trade - he was a city boy - a carpenter. When he used these images, he was calling on the Hebrew tradition of shepherd leaders - Moses, who was tending his father-in-law's flock when God called him - David, a shepherd boy called to be King of Israel - and others who, in the history of the

Hebrew people, were given responsibility by God to take care of the people, God's flock.

Unfortunately, many of them failed in this call, and the Hebrew scriptures are full of stories about bad kings and false prophets. So when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, he is contrasting himself with all those former leaders who had been poor or inadequate shepherds. They were, in some cases, no better than the hired hands - folks with no feeling for those they were supposed to care for.

In contrast, Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who is truly ready to 'lay down his life' for the good of the sheep. It is in that act of laying down his life for the sheep that Jesus created the new community, the new flock, that we call the church. In this new flock, we are all both shepherd and sheep - called by God to care for each other and for the world.

So, it was helpful to me to find an image that, while it may be old to some of us, is at least more modern than trying to understand the inner workings of keeping sheep:

Many of us may have seen - back in the day or on a movie channel - the Hollywood movie, "The Bridge On the River Kwai." The epic movie was about Allied soldiers and a British colonel captured by the Japanese in Burma during WWII and forced to build a railroad bridge in the jungle to aid their captors. As is true with many movies, however, the film only told part of the story.

Another, more important story can be found in the book, "Miracle on the River Kwai," by Ernest Gordon, who was a POW there. In it, the author says that the captive soldiers, amid the chaos of their situation, had devolved into barbaric behavior.

At the end of each work day, the Japanese guards carefully counted tools to make sure all had been returned. One afternoon, a shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squad confessed, the officer took out his gun and threatened to kill them all, shouting, "All die! All die!" Immediately, one man stepped forward, stood at attention and said, "I did it." The guard went into a rage, and proceeded to beat the man to death.

When it was over, the other prisoners picked up the bloody corpse of their comrade and carried it back to the camp. Later in the evening, there was another tool count. This time, no shovel was missing. There had been a miscount. The dead man was innocent. He had voluntarily died to spare the others. One of the prisoners remembered the verse, "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

But that's not the end of the story. The fact that someone had died to save for them made a profound change on the prisoners. As one of them said, "we wanted to be worthy of the sacrifice." Rather than compete with one other in order to live, the prisoners began to treat one another as brothers, looking out for each other and taking care of each other, sharing what little rations they had, binding up each others' wounds and other acts of self-sacrifice.

When the victorious allies swept in and liberated the prison camp, the Japanese guards were terrified. They fully expected to die, even to be executed on the spot. Their former prisoners, now little more than skeletons, lined up in front of the guards and began to shout. "No more hate. No more killing. What we need now is forgiveness." The Japanese guards were stunned, and broke down weeping.

This sacrificial death had transformative power. The death of an anonymous prisoner transformed the POWs from isolated and competing individuals into a community who cared about and for one another. The sheep became shepherds to one another. This sacrificial death also transformed the way the prisoners saw their captors. When the war was over, they chose to treat their oppressors as lost sheep - not as ravenous wolves. They saw them as the "sheep not from this flock," that Jesus spoke of, and decided to forgive them and love them.

A more recent story of this kind of forgiveness comes from an Amish community. A man who had suffered 9 years earlier the loss of his first-born child 20 minutes after she was born, had never gotten past his grief and anger. One morning in October of 2006 he walked into the one-room schoolhouse of a small Amish community in Lancaster County, PA. He shot 10 young girls, five of whom died, and then shot and killed himself.

Now the Amish are particularly good examples of the idea of being shepherds to one another, caring for everyone in the community, not just those of their own group, and who are very strong in their faith. In the midst of their grief over this

shocking loss, they didn't cast blame. Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family. During the afternoon of the shooting, the grandfather of one of the girls who was killed visited the man's family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. Later that week, the man's family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls, and Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at the man's funeral.

In a world at war and in a society that often points fingers and blames others, this reaction was unheard of.

Now I am NOT hoping that we will experience any kind of tragedy in order to understand what it means to be a shepherd to God's sheep! The point is that the Good Shepherd is not a good shepherd for only a select group. Jesus isn't going to leave some of us to the wolves and bring some of us home to safety. He cares for all of us and blesses all of us. He has laid down his life for all of us. His sacrifice, his love, his continued care - these are gifts. Given without condition and without exception.

So let us say 'thank you' for this gift by continuing the work of the good shepherd, caring for one another, loving each other, dying a little for each other, opening doors and tearing down barriers, and bringing every one of God's beloved flock into the sheepfold.

Amen.