

The Good Shepherd

Preached on The Second Sunday after Easter
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
April 18, 2021
Text: 1 Peter 2: 19-25; John 10: 11-16

Today, this Second Sunday after Easter, is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday, as both of our readings attest. In the scriptures of the Old Testament, the image of the shepherd is a symbol of divine government, and of human government also, as an imitation of the divine. Thus, God is addressed as shepherd: "Hear, O thou Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a sheep." (Psalm 80.1) And David, the shepherd boy, divinely anointed, becomes the shepherd King of Israel. And when Isaiah prophesies the coming deliverer, he too speaks of a shepherd: "He shall lead his flock like a shepherd, and gather the lambs unto his bosom." (Isaiah 40.1) And when Jesus, offspring of the House of David, calls himself the "good shepherd," his hearers would certainly have all this background in mind.

But this association of the shepherd with human governance was true not only in ancient Israel, but also in ancient Greece. From the time of Homer on, the Greeks spoke of kingship in terms of shepherding—a human office, no doubt, but also a reflection or imitation of the divine government of the universe. We must remember that in this time, and for most of human history, the majority of people assumed that there was a more important, unseen reality to which human laws and society were to conform. It is only in the modern world that this higher reality of ordering norms has been pervasively questioned.

But even people in the ancient world questioned the shepherd symbol, though for a different reason. In the first book of Plato's dialogue called the *Republic*, there is a conversation where Socrates is engaged in an argument with a Sophist called Thrasymachus, on the subject of justice. At this particular point in the argument, they are discussing the craft of government, and the idea of the shepherd is introduced. Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of naive foolishness. "You imagine," he says,

..that a shepherd studies the interests of his flocks, tending them and fattening them up with some other end in view than his master's profit or his own; and so you don't see that, in politics, the genuine ruler regards his subjects exactly like sheep, and thinks of nothing else, night and day, but the good he can get out of them for himself.

The gist of Socrates' reply is that although there may indeed be false shepherds, it is the sole concern of the shepherd's craft, *as such*, to do the best for the charges put under its care. As Socrates argues, a doctor is not a true or good doctor by virtue of making a lot of money. We say he or she is a good doctor to the extent they are successful at healing people. The same is true of all other human crafts. When crafts are performed as

they are meant to be, they seek the advantage of those served by them. When any skill is performed as it should be, it seeks a good outside of itself, and this includes governance. On that principle, it follows for Socrates, that any kind of authority worthy of its status, must consider solely what is best for those under its care.

Thus, Jesus, in today's Gospel lesson, draws a distinction between the good shepherd, who cares for the sheep, and the hireling, who is in the business for what he can get out of it for himself. "I am the good shepherd," says Jesus. "The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." Jesus' authority as shepherd, as governor of our lives, is established in his act of sacrifice: "I lay down my life for the sheep." And his shepherding is good indeed. His Resurrection—our Easter joy—is our foretaste of the green pastures and still waters of eternal life. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me." (Psalm 23.4)

The idea of Jesus as the good shepherd is certainly a very attractive image, and it has inspired centuries of Christian devotion, and there is probably no passage in the whole of scripture better-known or more loved than the twenty-third Psalm, with its picture of divine shepherding. Of course, the image can be sentimentalized and easily reduced to a feel-good poster. But that shouldn't minimize the fact that this comforting Psalm also points to the divine governing of the universe, the good shepherding of all things by God's wisdom and power.

In the earliest expressions of Christian art, the paintings which adorn the walls of the catacombs, a favorite theme is Jesus as the good shepherd. It is natural and obvious enough, of course, that the Risen Lord should be represented as shepherd of the dead. But it's not just that. Jesus is represented there as shepherd of the stars—the universal, cosmic shepherd: the Son of God. He is shown as "the power of God and the wisdom of God," (1 Cor. 1: 24) that is, the good governor of all that is, shepherding all things to their appointed end.

This shepherding, when it comes to the rebellious and unruly passions of humanity, requires great skill and a comprehension quite beyond our limited perspectives. A good shepherd of the human race must be all-wise and perceptive, possessing intellect of a scope we cannot fathom. But he also must be someone who is willing to put himself on the line for the sheep, for they face threats they cannot deal with on their own. He must be acquainted with difficulty and sacrifice, not seeking his own comfort, but the safety of the flock.

In the rough terrain in what was known as Judea, the areas for grazing are not the open fields with abundant grass we might imagine. They are often small, and reached only by way of treacherous and narrow paths, over precipitous drops where a false step can be fatal. The shepherd does not *drive* the herd here; he *leads* them. The shepherd goes first, seeking a workable route. All the while, making sure that the sheep don't wander off. This requires vigilance and focus. Sheep are not that bright and, absent good leadership, are inclined to get into trouble. They are defenseless against predators such as lions or bears, and they will often not be aware of how close they are to stepping off into the abyss. They need a shepherd to lead them to water and pasture—and to guard them

against a host of dangers on the way. If the shepherd has been with his sheep for a while, they become accustomed to his voice and will follow it. Another shepherd's voice they will not follow.

Those who belong to Christ know his voice and will follow it. In so doing, they will avoid the various harmful distractions and shiny objects that lead them astray. In learning to die to sin, they will become more aware of spiritual danger. As St. Peter says: "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1st Pet. 5: 8) And here is where the analogy between us and sheep limps a little. For in following our Good Shepherd, we should be becoming more like him in his holiness and self-denial. He is our example, our model of how we should live. We should "follow his steps" as Peter says. This involves growing in discernment and wisdom. We are actually growing into new creatures as we become more like Jesus through practice, discipline, and a life characterized by love. It is doubtful if sheep are capable of spiritual growth or are capable of *learning* anything outside of rather mindless conditioning. But we *are* to learn—for Jesus is our teacher as well as our shepherd.

As we have already touched on, Jesus as the Good Shepherd speaks to the universal providence of God . "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they should hear my voice; and there should be one flock, and one shepherd." It is a shepherding which includes the whole creation. As St. Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God . . . because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Romans 8: 19, 21) God has big plans for us; we are not to be just mindless followers. We are called to be critically involved in ushering in God's Kingdom as we are faithful to the Spirit's leading.

It is easy enough to become cynical and doubtful about the divine government of things, given what we see in the political world. There are plenty of hirelings who, as Thrasymachus says, govern for their own advantage, not for the good of the governed. But those following Jesus can be confident that he truly wants the best for us. We need have no doubts on that score. God governs all things for the best. Jesus's Resurrection is the ultimate witness of good shepherding: it witnesses to God's power to bring the highest good out of the worst evil. No doubt we have considerable capacities for wickedness; but it's just foolish presumption to suppose that our wickedness will have the last word. In the end, God's will is surely done.

That is the witness of the Resurrection, and that is the promise of the Resurrection. And that is the witness and promise of the Blessed Sacrament we celebrate. Out of body broken and blood shed, the grace of God brings new and eternal life. "The wolf cometh, and the hireling fleeth, but "the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." That is good shepherding, and with such shepherding, we lack nothing.

In the Name...