

Sermon Easter 4
Good Shepherd Sunday
Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
May 11, 2014
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Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. The fourth Sunday in Eastertide is always Good Shepherd Sunday, as you know the date moves around a bit but we always pause at this point to study the images of Jesus as the Good shepherd found in John's gospel. This is one of the many "I am" statements that Jesus makes do you know the others? I rather imagine you had to memorize them in Sunday school but let's see how many are there? Any guesses? Seven. How many do you know? Jesus said I am:

1. The Bread Of Life

2. The Light Of The World

3. The Gate

4. The Good Shepherd

5. The Resurrection And The Life

6. The Way, The Truth, And The Life

7. The Vine

By far the image that people most remember and relate to Jesus through is the image of the Good Shepherd even for folks who have little affiliation with church in times of distress this image is what comes to mind and the familiar of the 23rd Psalm ushers in comfort and peace amidst the most awful of times.

Some of you may recall, as I do, that my very first sermon from this pulpit was on Good Shepherd Sunday six years ago. I chose at the time to focus not on the

shepherd but on the sheep dogs, not wanting to compare myself in my first tender days of ministry here with the one true shepherd. I recall sharing with you that like any good sheep dog, you would probably hear my bark, and I'm sure you have and that like any good sheep dog you would probably feel me nip at your heels...or some other part of your anatomy which I shan't mention here and I rather imagine you have. I believe I shared with you that like any good sheep dog my desire, my drive would be to push you ever forward toward the sheepfold.

As I study the text this year I am reminded of all the shepherds I have watched over the years, all over the world. I have watched shepherds in the desert southwest and in Ireland, in France and in Israel and many places in between and as I think about them a certain image floats before my eyes. There is the flock fanned out on whatever spit of land foraging away mindless really of where they are going except for the constant direction of the shepherd who walks behind them usually with a sheep dog to his or her right and a sheep dog to his or her left. If you've ever watched a herder, you know that through a series of whistles and clicks and subtle hand movements the dogs and the shepherd work the sheep in an ever narrowing swath toward the gate and into the sheepfold for the night.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells us "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."

The shepherd's job was to feed, guard and care for all the sheep who lived within the enclosure of the field. In the gospel today we see a similar imagery. But Jesus takes this familiar imagery and applies it to teach about his relationship with his church.

Baptism was somewhat different in the early church, converts were brought to baptism on Easter eve, at what we call the Easter Vigil. Eastertide was, for them, the beginning of their new life, new identity and new purpose. The new converts may have spent as much as three years leaning about the Faith. During that period they were not permitted to join the Christian community around the altar. They couldn't receive communion. They were at the gate to the fold, but not yet inside it. Finally professing Christ and him crucified allowed them into the fold, entrance in to the community, and a place at the table.

It's important for us to grasp the fact that these new Christians had been led by the Risen Lord into a fellowship. That all of this was done in the context of community and of making a choice to be part of this new and different way of life. Today we have become accustomed to "personal religion": "Jesus saved me," and "I'm going to go to Heaven when I die." At first glance, that is what Jesus seems to be saying: "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

For them songs like My Jesus, My Savior, you know;

My Jesus, My Saviour,
 Lord there is no one like you,
 All of my days, I want to praise
 The wonders of Your mighty love.

My comfort, my shelter,
 Tower of refuge and strength
 Let every breath, all that I am
 Never cease to worship You.

Would simply not make any sense.

The people who first heard John's gospel would have heard something quite different. They did not come from our culture of individualism, a me and my personal God culture. We need to listen with their ears. The words "enters by me" meant to the first Christians – and should mean to us – baptism. We don't baptize ourselves. We are baptized in the body of Christ, the church, on a Sunday, surrounded by Christians. From that moment on, we have pasture, we may be fed at the Lord's Table, by the Lord's bounty. We become part of those who have been "enclosed" in the communion of the church, this church specific and the larger church in general.

To the first Christians, "coming in and going out" happened in the context of the church's growth and the church's danger. The people doing the growing were those who had been "saved," rescued, taken out of a hostile world. As they shared their new faith and brought others to the door to the fold, the church grew by leaps and bounds. Someone said of them, "See these are they who turn the world upside down." Because of their success, they threatened the power of the Roman Empire, whose "thieves" sought to invade and destroy the fold, the church.

We, too, have entered into the fold through our baptism. We share a common essential identity as Christians. We gather in the fold of the local church to have fellowship, to be taught, to be fed. We go out to make disciples, to work for the Kingdom, to love justice and mercy, to care for the poor and the outcast. Such a corporate calling is exciting and demanding and continues to cost.

We, in America, are safe from such suffering. However, and maybe precisely because we are safe from suffering, we are called each of us individually and corporately by virtue of our baptism to be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

To what, you may ask should we raise our cry? Sadly the list is long and ever changing. We may want to start by decrying the still rampant racism that exists here and elsewhere most recently evidenced in the situation with the Clippers. Or we may want to turn our voices to the harrowing kidnapping of school girls in Nigeria, or to the fact that nearly a month later there seems to be little organized response to the disappearance of perhaps as many as 200 young girls. Or we may want to decry the fact that we still can't figure out how to make health care available for everyone or that we can't seem to figure out how to afford a living wage for everyone. I know each of you could probably give me a list as long as your right arm and maybe even longer with the things that need our focus our attention our shepherding to bring them to rights, not our rights but God's rights

Our Gospel today tells us that Jesus is the gate, baptism is the gate, the entre to a new and abundant life but that life does not come without demand. It is true that one my very first Sunday with you I chose not to compare myself with the one true Shepherd but today I choose to compare each of us, in fact challenge each of us, to embrace the role of shepherd given us by our baptism. In John 14 verse 12 Jesus says "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." It's time to embrace your inner shepherd.