

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2018
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Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

A devout shepherd lost his favorite Bible one day while he was out looking for a wayward lamb. He looked high and low, but it was nowhere to be found. And then one day, three weeks later, a sheep walked up to him carrying that very Bible in its mouth. The shepherd couldn't believe his eyes. He took the precious book out of the sheep's mouth, raised his eyes heavenward and exclaimed, "It's a miracle!" "Not really," said the sheep. "Your name is written inside the cover."

It's absurd, of course. Sheep don't talk. And sheep don't read. But maybe the sheep would know where to go. After all, they *do* know their shepherd.

That's the point Jesus applies in this morning's gospel:

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ...

With such a metaphor, Jesus is drawing upon a deep well of imagery in the Bible that was – and still is – deep and powerful. The 23rd Psalm is part of that well. And when Jesus describes himself as a shepherd, his hearers might not have been able NOT to think of the opening words:

The Lord is my shepherd ...

The Psalms are, by tradition, attributed to King David. It'd be hard to prove, and personally, it seems to me unlikely that David wrote all 150 of the psalms. But let's go with it, if only for Psalm 23. After all, before he was anointed as king, David was a shepherd.

He had first-hand experience with shepherding. He could imagine God to be for him as David himself was for his sheep. So he describes God as the one who leads us beside still waters and makes us lie down in green pastures. God is the one who offers us rest and nourishment and the restoration of our souls. God blesses us in all the good times of this life.

And God is our blessed companion in darker times, as well:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; *
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*

That was David's life, by the way. He knew what it was like to run and hide in fear of his enemies. He knew what it was like to grieve the death of a child and the death of a dearest friend. He knew he had abused his power to arrange the death of a trusted servant in order to obtain what wasn't his. And he trusted that God was with him through all of it, when he felt blessed, when he felt imperiled, and when he knew he didn't deserve any of it.

Jesus says that much about himself and his relationship to us: a blessing in good times; a companion in hard times; and the one who loves us in all times, whether we deserve it or not.

And there's something more at issue. Jesus doesn't merely describe himself as "*the shepherd*." Twice in this brief passage, Jesus says:

I am the good shepherd.

If the 23rd Psalm was the only shepherd mentioned in the Bible, we might think Jesus offers himself as a companion to us in all the seasons of life. But that biblical well of images includes other shepherds. So when Jesus emphasizes that he is the "GOOD shepherd," it obliges us, I think, to consider other not-so-good shepherds.

Jesus speaks, of course, of the "the hired hand" – who cares not for the sheep, but only for the paycheck; who runs away in the face of danger because he was always only taking care of their own skin. And then Jesus speaks of himself, instead, as one who loves the sheep, who gives of himself – even to the point of death – *for* the sheep. The language, especially on the 4th Sunday of Easter, recalls the leaders who crucified Jesus and the God who raises Jesus to new life.

And I think there's a bit of Christmas in there, as well. In John's gospel, Jesus speaks explicitly of the hired hands. The prophetic tradition is full of other shepherds who use and abuse people they should care for. Ezekiel, for example, gives this scathing indictment in his time:

The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them – to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. (Ezekiel 34:1-6)

I said there's some Christmas in here. It's in the verses that follow. Because after criticizing the rulers of his day, Ezekiel's God says: "I myself will search for my sheep ..." "I will rescue them ..." "I will feed them ..." In other words, "I will be their shepherd." And that sounds to me like Christmas, like the Incarnation, like the Word become flesh to dwell among us, to be always for us. And not just us, but a gift for the whole world (not just for you and me). Or as Jesus says in this morning's gospel:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

We sometimes read these words at a funeral or a memorial service. They have occasionally been very helpful, reassuring for a non-church person, affirming the wideness of God's mercy.

And they also challenge us inside the church. They remind us that while God loves each and every one of us, God also loves each and every one of “them” as well.

And maybe that’s why I’ve been thinking this past week of an old Christmas story Frederick Buechner once told. I sometimes imagined it as autobiographical. Maybe it is. Maybe not. Either way, here it is:

The young clergyman and his wife do all the things you do on Christmas Eve. They string the lights and hang the ornaments. They supervise the hanging of the stockings. They tuck in the children. They lug the presents down out of hiding and pile them under the tree. Just as they’re about to fall exhausted into bed, the husband remembers his neighbor's sheep. The man asked him to feed them for him while he was away, and in the press of other matters that night he forgot all about them. So down the hill he goes through knee-deep snow. He gets two bales of hay from the barn and carries them out to the shed. There's a forty-watt bulb hanging by its cord from the low roof, and he turns it on. The sheep huddle in a corner watching as he snaps the baling twine, shakes the squares of hay apart, and starts scattering it. Then they come stumbling and shoving to get at it with their foolish, mild faces, the puffs of their breath showing in the air. He is reaching to turn off the bulb and leave when suddenly he realizes where he is. The winter darkness. The glimmer of light. The smell of the hay and the sound of the animals eating. Where he is, of course, is the manger.

He only just saw it. He whose business it is above everything else to have an eye for such things is all but blind in that eye. He who on his best days believes that everything that is most precious anywhere comes from that manger might easily have gone home to bed never knowing that he had himself just been in the manger. The world is the manger. It is only by grace that he happens to see this other part of the miracle.ⁱ

Jesus is the shepherd ... the *good* shepherd ... the good shepherd *for one and for all*. He looks around and sees a world shot through with holiness. And Jesus looks around and sees the holes that need to be filled, the world that needs someone – needs us – to care.

Sheep don’t talk. And sheep don’t read. But they *do* know their shepherd. Good Shepherd Sunday is a day for us to make sure we know *our* shepherd: in good times a blessing; in hard times a faithful companion; and in all times the one who longs to lead us home. Jesus would be known to us as the GOOD shepherd who is both a challenge to the status quo and a better option. Jesus would be known to us as the shepherd who comes to us to help us see that we are all part of one flock, one family.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, “Christmas,” in *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco, 1988), p. 28.