

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 22, 2018

Church of the Advent

The Lord is My Shepherd

Our gospel this morning seems to be all about sheep—those cuddly, white, soft, fleecy, fluffy little animals that are so endearing in our imaginations. Is that not the first thing you think of when you hear someone referring to sheep—a little stuffed lamb sitting in the corner of a baby crib, waiting for the arrival of a newborn, maybe one you could wind



up to play, “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” that first tune you learned to play with one finger on a piano before your feet could even reach the pedals? What is it about sheep, anyway?

When Mark and I lived in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia I commuted into suburban DC on a back road that went past a sheep farm. Most often, the sheep were just part of the distant scenery, but in lambing season the ewes would be in a barnyard close to the road. They looked about as uncomfortable carrying a term twin pregnancy as human moms—tired and cranky, shuffling around in their scruffy dirt-stained wooly bathrobes, waiting for their imminent offspring to make their way into the world. Then it always seemed like within the same day or two, the yard was filled with new lambs, snowy white and jet black, startled, nervous, bleating, and all over the place. Within a week, they were running and

playing with each other, leaping and jumping—just as noisy but twice as cute, and I tried not to think about the timing of their births to coincide with the Jewish Passover and Greek Orthodox Easter that would be celebrated in the next month or two, when they would all be appreciated in a quite different stage of their life cycle. I never had time on my morning commute, but sometimes in the evening I would pull off the road just to watch them being fully alive as God’s creatures in all their beauty and innocence and joyful play.

Then, during the walking vacation Mark and I took across the Lake District of Northern England a few years ago, I got to know lots of sheep way more up-close and personal. Sheep vastly outnumbered the humans we were hiking with, as we made our way along footpaths through their pastures and along the many miles of stone walls that kept them organized and safe. I learned that a sheep is not a sheep—there are different kinds bred for different kinds of wool with different purposes. I saw sheep whose job it was to keep the grass trimmed around the gravestones in a churchyard, and sheep who were pretty free to roam from field to field and onto the front lawns of houses—occasionally requiring a constable to sort things out. I saw sheep that were spray painted with splotches of certain colors in certain spots—a system of local branding that told each farmer which ones in a larger herd belonged to which humans. I learned that there is one particular breed of sheep dating from the 12th Century called Herdwick, so connected to their territory, that when there is a land sale, the law says the sheep must go *with* the land, because if you move them even many miles away to new pasture, they will wander back again and again until they find their way home. And I learned that each ewe and lamb

(mother and child) had a distinct call and response language recognized by each other— often heard across a field or from behind a stone wall. Even while playing in a group of lambs of similar age and disposition, or munching on bright green grass on a beautiful sunny day, lambs called out to their mothers that they could not see, anticipating replies that reassured them that love and protection were near. Listening to this call and response reminded me of a time when I was five and found myself separated from my mother in a supermarket, wandering, calling and listening frantically for her voice.

It is easy to love sheep, and to love the idea of a shepherd taking care of his sheep. It is easy to love the image Jesus has offered of himself as the Good Shepherd who places the care of his sheep over his own well-being. And if Jesus sees *us* as the lovable sheep, then we can be *sure* we are loved, even to the extreme of being borne upon his shoulders and brought back into the fold when lost. If the Lord is our Shepherd, we shall not want for anything.

It wasn't until I got home from England and did a little research that I found that from the point of view of a sheep farmer, sheep are not such romantic creatures as I had believed. Sheep are pretty filthy animals—their wool is sometimes so caked with even their own waste that they need to be cleaned with *Woolite* before they are sheared. So much for those snow-white lambs, I guess. They are frustrating to care for, and basically not smart, with one Texas shepherd quoted as saying, "Sheep are born just looking for a way to die." Sheep will follow other sheep even when it is not in their best interest to do so, and are not known for turning around in self-

preservation if the one they are following is on a path of sheep self-destruction. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd, but sometimes will ignore it; and they *will* sometimes follow a stranger's voice, if they do not know their shepherd well. In the words of one Australian shepherd, "Sheep-work is dirty, unromantic, and requires a certain hardness of heart." I witnessed first-hand at Exum's 4H show that lambs can be as cantankerous and stubborn as they are cute. When they don't want to go, they pull and bleat and just lay down on the ground, bucking and pulling and taking a lot of strength and energy for their young caretakers to lead them on a short trip around the ring and back to their pens. It made me tired just to watch those kids struggle with them. And I am not even talking about the goats.

Ancient shepherds had it even rougher, without 4H programs to lead and guide them. Like the legendary King David—armed with no more than



a slingshot—they lived out in the pastures with the sheep and guarded them from predators with their

own bodies. At night, a shepherd would gather his sheep into a sheepfold—a stone enclosure—and then lie across the opening, positioning himself between the sheep and the wolf—using his own body as a gate. In the morning, he would lead his flock back to the fresh water and sweet grasses that those sweet, smelly, endearing, troublesome, not-so-smart sheep needed to survive and grow. This is the image of faithfulness and sacrifice

that Jesus meant to offer when he described himself as the Good Shepherd—the one who lays down his life for his sheep.

So if Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then I guess we are the sheep. Sheep who are innocent, sweet, lovely, energetic and as life-loving as newborn lambs, and as confused, stubborn, dirty, smelly, anxious, stupid and bleating as grown up sheep, willing to follow any voice anywhere, without regard to how or where it might lead us to places that are not destined to be in our best interest. Either way, if it is true that we are born just looking for a way to die, we *need* our Good Shepherd.

It is a wonder and a blessing that our Shepherd King keeps calling us—with a voice we can hear above our own bleating—but he does. He calls us not just into the sheepfold for our own protection but out of our self-focus, our self-interest, and our self-destruction into the one flock of abundant life. He calls us into lives of meaning and purpose, where we can't help but to love and care for one another. And he calls us to lives of witness—where without shame we can stand before those in our own time who would otherwise lead us to places not in our best interest, even off the nearest cliff—and tell them about Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and what it means to us to listen to his voice and how our lives are changed by following where he leads.

Though we find ourselves walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we are called by name. Our Shepherd knows each bleat, each mark of belonging, and each and every pasture where we wander. And in spite of our tendency to go from sweet innocent and life-loving lambs to unkempt,

smelly stubborn sheep, our Good Shepherd has laid down his life for us, offering us the opportunity for abundant life as rich and beautiful as the deep green grass of a Summer meadow, where we can always find our way home. And that is Good News, bringing goodness and mercy to follow us all the days of our lives. Thanks be to God. AMEN