

SERMON- Easter 4 (B)
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~~1 John 3:16-24~~

John 10:11-18

Psalms 23

Good Shepherd
April 25, 2021

OPENING:

Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't solve the perpetual "Cats vs. Dogs" debate: because, famously, cats are never mentioned in the Bible.

And although dogs are often mentioned in Holy Scripture, it's almost always negative.

Now, my last name is "Cowherd" and if I had a nickel for every time someone asked me: "Do you think your ancestors herded cows?"—I would be very rich. But I don't know much about animals and my affection for them, even, sometimes can be lacking.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, though, and *history* being more my wheelhouse, maybe I could share some tidbits from our past, rather than show how little I know about animals.

I was indeed able to find a nugget from Good Shepherd's history, that also involves animals!

There are frequent references in vestry minutes, and I have had conversations with some of our more venerable members that confirm this, about animals *at* Good Shepherd, or rather animals **inside** Good Shepherd.

Mice, wasps, and snakes even are featured often in accounts from the 'Old Church,' appearing mid-service on the floor and in the rafters, at which point they would have to be shunted out by watchful ushers.

Today we will reverse that pattern—being outside and inviting the animals to us. On Good Shepherd Sunday, we celebrate the 140+ years of this parish with sheep and shepherds as the focus for the day, and "AMEN" to that.

And there were a lot of metaphors that Jesus used to help us understand who he was: "Christ the King" "Holy Comforter" "The Advocate" "Bread of Life"

But the most famous of these is the "Good Shepherd."

Our predecessors liked it so much that they chose it to name this church, so here we are.

SHEEP:

These metaphors—from Psalm 23, from our Gospel, from our hymns—will become real in front of our very eyes and noses after the service. And they serve another purpose: to remind us just how smelly and dirty and sheeplike that WE are.

That's a little bit of an Ash Wednesday message, maybe, which does not strike the celebratory tone of Good Shepherd Sunday.

But, think about it in the 1st century, in Jesus' time, they probably had less illusions about sheep and their innate cuddliness or intrinsic value.

Sheep were a powerful symbol not because of their cuteness or their goodness, but because of their limitations.

So this means some forgetting of what we learned in Sunday school of Jesus surrounded by animals like St. Francis or Dr. Doolittle.

Jesus might have indeed loved animals, but I think his point was different, and was the same point that he made elsewhere about *children*.

Children were to be loved because they are vulnerable, they cannot fend for themselves. They need direction and care and guidance, just like sheep.

Jesus had not read 20th century parenting books or heard podcasts from the 21st, so his message was actually not that children and animals had value because they were better and somehow free from the sins of society, but because they were vulnerable. That's what gave them special value in his reckoning

That's one thing, but the idea gets tougher to swallow because Jesus keeps calling the disciples, "children" and calling them "sheep."¹

That means that WE are the "sheep."

DISCIPLE-'SHEEP'

Now sheep really took out on the chin (do sheep have chins?) during the pandemic. Not sheep as animals, but "sheep" as a concept because there were all sorts of references to people who followed medical advice as being sheeplike in their mindless obedience.

There's nothing more to say to that other than that there is nothing more deeply rooted in the Anglican/Episcopalian tradition than to use the gifts that God has made available to you, including science and the wisdom of the community.

¹ John 13.33, or today's Epistle 1 John 3.18.

Regardless, our “job” as sheep—during the pandemic, and pre- and post-pandemic—is to keep listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd, remembering what it sounds like, distinguishing it from other voices.

Otherwise, our job as sheep is just to laze around in the fields and eat grass. Really! How do we get to do that? One commentator writes it this way:

Sheep live in leisure because they have a future, defined by hope, protected and nurtured by the Shepherd. “They can enjoy today because there is a tomorrow; they can live in the moment because they know that moment is not the last.”²

What a word of Good News, of Gospel hope, that we need now and always.

GOOD SHEPHERD

Now, we don’t want to be sheep. WE want to be the Good Shepherd (or at least I do) but the reminder here is that that job is already taken up.

Jesus does not actually need a Vice-Shepherd or an “Assistant to the Regional Manager” Shepherd.

So the Church is always trying to get back to that image of the Good Shepherd, even as it falls in love with the other ones—Christ the King during Medieval Times, Jesus as Philosopher during the Enlightenment, “Cool, best friend” Jesus from last century.

Around the time that Good Shepherd was founded, there was a whole movement in Christianity about going back outdoors, getting closer to the earth, reminding ourselves of our connection to creation and our closeness to animals.

That movement was responding (here’s more historical tidbits) to urbanization and industrialization. It included the founding of the YMCA, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, think Teddy Roosevelt, even the Boy Scouts and the Olympics were in this larger movement.

Closer to home, Shrinemont (the Diocese of Virginia’s Camp and Conference Center) was founded, in part, in order to get people outside, communing with nature and with animals. There was a particular concern that clergy, living in Richmond and in Northern Virginia, were getting a little soft, and needed to be outdoors more. This was a hundred years ago!

Safe to say, the Church always needs to be reminded about Christ as the Good Shepherd. Maybe that’s why we got named what we did.

² Edwin Chr. Van Driel “Theological Perspective” 2009. in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2009. *Feasting on the Word* (Year B, Volume 3) Louisville: Westminster Knox, 248, 250.

CONCLUSION:

Fortunately, the call of the Good Shepherd is a powerful one, it's comforting like a nudge to a wayward lamb, but also fierce in protecting us from the dangerous wolves.

We all have heard that call in some way, that's why we are here.

Nothing makes me happier than to hear stories about how people found their way, how people heard that call, how parishioners "chose" Good Shepherd as their parish church.

Mine is simple: I interviewed with Christine 3 plus years ago now and at some point, she said "Charles, there is a Resurrection going on this place, I know it because I have experienced it in my own life, and it's happening here too. You have seen it in your life as well, Resurrection is happening here at Good Shepherd."

Those were powerful words, from my (future) boss. 3 years later, I am still here, a bunch of animals in my back yard. I share that and you could say "That's a good narrative of decision-making... she said it, you heard them."

She chose me to come, I chose to do likewise.

But here is what Jesus said about that dynamic, his voice and his call: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."³

We are here not because we chose to, but because someone else chose us.

Here's a sample of how some of you described how you "chose" to be here:

"we showed up one day and never left." that one happens a lot.

"Our neighbors said we should try it and know we could not live without it"

This one touched me: "We were on our way to leaving and something pulled us back in. "

My favorite: "We joined because of the discount at the Preschool, now I am on the vestry."

What do you call that sort of behavior?

You call it the Holy Spirit moving the hearts and minds and bodies into a church.

Or you call it a bunch of Sheep, hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, becoming the Church of the Good Shepherd. **AMEN**

³ John 15.16