

4 Easter – Year B – May 3, 2009
Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18
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Last week we talked about how the Psalmist revealed the secret of a good night's sleep. Hint: it isn't in counting sheep! Nevertheless, there are a lot of shepherd and sheep references in today's readings, which make it hard ignore the fact that if Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then as His followers and flock, you and I are being equated with sheep. Since sheep are truly not the smartest of God's creatures, we have to do a little work to set aside our rising feelings of what? Is there a little irritation perhaps at being likened to a sheep? A little human pride maybe? Or are we mostly willing to put on a rueful smile and utter a dismissive "whatever"? In fact, why don't we all say that together – after three, let's have the collective "whatever" so we can move on. One. Two. Three. "Whatever!" Personally speaking, all I can say is that I'd rather be known as a sheep, than one of the brood of vipers!

The Bible is full of parables and metaphors that offer windows into the richer meaning of God in Christ Jesus. A common one is Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Like all good metaphors, it is taken from daily life, and we are invited to make the symbolic connections at the most obvious, as well as the deepest levels. For the ancient Israelites, shepherding was a way of life and an easily accessible metaphor. Today, it is a little less available, yet seeing, acknowledging, being in God through Jesus Christ in all the tasks of our daily lives has always been the Christian way. Here are some famous shepherds in the Bible: Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve. Abraham, Moses, Jacob's wife Rachel, their son Joseph, and his brothers were also shepherds. David, the youngest son of Jesse was tending the sheep when he was called and anointed as king. The prophets speak of good shepherds of the people, like King David, and wicked shepherds like the priests, kings and leaders of Israel who do not follow God's commandments. In the Gospels Jesus comes for the lost sheep of Israel, and in the end Jesus is the Paschal Lamb, who willingly gives his life for the life of the world.

The twenty-third psalm is perhaps *the* most well known and beloved Psalm. Even so, according to the research of W.L. Holladay, that's a relatively recent and most distinctly American phenomenon, that seems to have originated in the late nineteenth century. Holladay believes that the first-person-singular idiom of the psalm was so appealing because it fit the emerging individualism and independence of Americans. Historically, this development falls into the period when scientific discovery was powering the emergence of rationalism. The kind of individual identity and clarity that has become completely enculturated in this day and age, was entirely alien to the Psalmist. So when David, who is credited as the author of Psalm 23, writes, "The Lord is my shepherd," he does so first and foremost from an understanding that he is God's anointed agent and leader of the community of God's chosen people. His sense of connection with God flows from his love of God as God's anointed servant leader of the community of faith. Indeed, despite his peccadilloes, David's love of God is never questioned, and history knows him as the Shepherd King. Even though you and I delight to say with David, "The Lord is my shepherd" it is as members of the Body of Christ. As Biblical scholar, James L. Mays, reminds us, "[We] must not say 'my shepherd', without also and first saying 'our shepherd'. Sheep by nature belong to a flock.... The privilege and wonders of being able to say 'my shepherd' are a benefit that comes with belonging to the [community]."

As Jesus shares with us in the Gospel reading, the shepherd truly cares for His flock. He leads the sheep to the best pastures to provide for their daily needs. He guides them away from dangerous ravines, rocks, and poisonous weeds. The shepherd protects His sheep from parasites and predators. Unlike the hired hand, He **will** risk his life for the sheep, and do all that he can to keep them healthy and safe. The more we know about the reality of a sheep's dependence, helplessness, and sheer stubborn bloody-mindedness, in humility we have to admit that the analogy for you, me and all humanity is actually a pretty good one. Moreover, because we are rational human beings, when we seek with humble hearts, we begin to glimpse and appreciate even more the incredible gift of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We see it here and there through the folds of our warm and comfortable cloak of righteousness, which is in

turn a gift of faith. It is woven in the self-same wool of humanity that Jesus wore in **His** humility as he walked the earth to show us the path to God's green pastures and still waters.

"He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake." In shepherding, the parallel to a soul that is cast down is a sheep that is 'cast'. According to shepherd and author, Philip Keller, this is an old English term for a sheep that is lying on its back, unable to right itself. Without help, the sheep will exhaust itself and die. A 'cast' sheep is an easy target for predators. When you and I fall into sin, we too are like cast sheep. We have turned our face away from God, and in doing so we have offered ourselves to the wolves. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus never gives up on any of us. With unceasingly love He seeks us out constantly in order to bring us out of danger. Our Lord works through His flock diligently drawing us back to Himself, providing for our needs, even in our despair and ingratitude. God's steadfast love, care and provision for His children is constant and unswerving. When our souls are revived or restored, it means that our true life -- the life we have in Christ Jesus -- is returned to each of us, so that we might live in Him and for Him now and forever. By living in Christ, we manifest one of the greatest witnesses of a Christian to the world. That is knowing intimately the simplicity and contentment, the beauty and blessed joy of faith in action, living from the abundance of God's love. In God's love through Jesus Christ, we truly want for nothing in our lives.

During the summer months, sheep are usually led to the highest mesa or table of pasture for the best grazing. In preparation for this move, good shepherds will ensure that there are salt and mineral supplements available for the sheep to keep them healthy, as well as suitable clean and safe water holes. A vigilant shepherd knows that when summer comes, so do the flies. A sheep's head and nose are ideal sites for all kinds of flies and parasites to lay their eggs. If allowed to go unchecked, the inflammation and pain will drive the sheep to insanely bash its head repeatedly even to death. To prevent this, the diligent shepherd will pour a mixture of oil, sulfur and tar on the sheep's head. In Jesus' day, a sign of respect and hospitality was to pour oil over the head of a guest. Does the phrase "pour oil on troubled waters" come to mind? When our minds are troubled, when our heads are full of thoughts that lead us to want to butt heads, how do we submit ourselves again to the care of our Lord? How do you and I practice the fruit of the Spirit that is self-control before our anger and frustration spill over into unkind words, hurtful deeds, or mean-spirited gossip? Whenever Jesus was troubled in spirit, He always turned God the Father in prayer, surrendering His will to God's will. To you and I He says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

This is our way of life as brothers and sisters in Christ, to surrender daily, even moment-by-moment to the loving care of the Good Shepherd who is Jesus, our Lord and Savior. When we abide in Him, we accept the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us in every aspect of our lives. In Christ, you and I are blessed with abundant life. The Good Shepherd is constantly seeking a deeper relationship with you and me. Let us always come to the Lord in prayer with our troubled minds and hearts. Let us come to the banquet table with thankful hearts. May we offer to God the sacrifice of ourselves, as holy vessels filled to overflowing with the Good News of healing and salvation in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Amen.