*Sermon from the 4th Sunday of Easter on the Occasion of a Baptism, Year A*

*30 April 2023*

*St. Matthew’s Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit*

*Acts 2:42-47; Ps 23; 1 Pet 2:19-25; Jn 10:1-10*

What does it mean for the Shepherd in Jesus’ parable today to be “good”? Good, in this context, means skillful. He’s good at his job. I think sometimes we hear this phrase, “good shepherd,” and kinda just associate him with tenderness, ya know? He’s caring, sentimental. But that isn’t the picture *really* that we get in today’s Gospel. In Scripture, he is a “good” shepherd insofar as he is able to preserve the life of the sheep. He locates good pastures for them to graze. He protects them from dangers on the way, from thieves and from wolves. In other words, he is a Good Shepherd because he ensures that his sheep stay alive.

Romantic or sentimental conceptions of what it means for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd simply leave out the brutality of what it takes to keep a flock alive. In “The Shepherd’s Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape,” author and shepherd, James Rebanks, informs people like you and me who wanna know about what it takes to keep sheep. For one, he tells us, just as in more ancient times, tending sheep today is really hard work, and it usually doesn’t make for much of a living. Then, sheep also have to be bred to navigate difficult landscapes. The sheep aren’t all the same everywhere, and because of the different conditions they have to live in. And, then there’s dealing with sheep dogs, which, if not trained well, will just as likely help you gather your sheep as well as chase them off of cliffs or abandon them altogether. Where Jesus’ illustration seems to depart from Rebanks’ description of shepherds, though, is that Jesus is a shepherd without any other helpers. And, while shepherds typically don’t have to love their sheep to care well for them, Jesus, on the other hand, we’re told, *knows* and loves his sheep, calls to them by name.

Despite being a “good” shepherd — one who is good at his job — Jesus doesn’t raise sheep for profit either. He isn’t *in it* for what he gets out of it. For Jesus, it is just the sheer possession of the sheep that is his only aim and profit. He is never not the Good Shepherd. He is defined by this labor, of preserving the fold.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve usually heard this passage to be about eternal life. This passage has probably been read this way — of being just about heaven— because of verses like John 14:6, which certainly informs what’s going on in our passage today. There, Jesus says, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*.” But, I don’t want us to think that the name of Jesus is simply a “magic word” or one-time password that simply gives us access to heaven. This kind of reading just doesn’t seem to do justice to this metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep.

Now, about these sheep. The first thing to see about this shepherd’s sheep is that they are totally dependent on their shepherd for their lives. Utterly vulnerable as they are, they *at least* have learned that it is *only* in response to *this* Shepherd that they will find life. Only *his voice* can be trusted to lead them to where they need to go. They respond to the Shepherd because his care for them has proven true.

Then, in contrast, there are those who do not believe and so are not the sheep of this Good Shepherd. They have left the fold that Jesus has gathered together, that he leads, and preserves.

But, it’s not that those who disbelieve have simply entrusted themselves to the skills of other shepherds, either. Jesus himself is singularly “the Good Shepherd,” while others are thieves and imposters who only manage to lure the sheep away from the fold.

So that brings into view a second point, one that seems to suggest that this passage isn’t just about eternal life. This second point gets at the heart of the shepherd image Jesus uses to describe himself. Sheep are vulnerable and their lives remain threatened by outside dangers. Even though they are gathered by Jesus, Jesus talks about remaining dangers that threaten the lives of the sheep: thieves, robbers, and prowling wolves that circle the sheep pen. These are the false teachers, representatives of false religion, and those partisan-winds that blow believers here and there—all those that seek to separate the sheep from Jesus’ life-giving presence.

So, what this means is that even after the sheep cross the threshold into the gate, after faith in Christ, there is still more action that goes on. Our lives are all proof of this. The sheep still need to eat, they still need to be protected, and led. And it is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who skillfully guides the sheep to where they need to go.

The sheep remain dependent on Christ, and not just *once* they have crossed the gate. Indeed, what John seems to want us to see is that Jesus is our ongoing source of light and life.

So, faith, here, doesn’t simply seem to just be about knowledge of Jesus, but about actively depending on him along the whole course of discipleship, listening for the Shepherd’s voice and going where he wishes us to go. In this way the Shepherd guides the life of the Church through the valley of the shadow of death. The valley isn’t removed from the sheep; rather, the Good Shepherd, Jesus, shows us through difficult landscapes — Landscapes he takes us into! But, by depending on Jesus and the life he gives, the flock of Jesus, his disciples, are able to follow him wherever he leads them.

So, we’re still not just talking about coming to Church, occupying our seat in the synagogue or in the church. Rather, the “pasture” *is* Jesus himself. And, as he draws us to himself, he does not just do so individually, but together *as* a sheep-fold. The life of the one sheep is preserved amidst the flock guided by Jesus’ voice. So, the Church is fundamentally identified with its acts of *listening* and responding to him.

There, amidst this fold, we are enjoined to those others that Jesus has called to himself. And, this is where we find life, in the Lord’s presence, who guards and gives life to his disciples. The Church, in essence, isn’t static or immobile, but are identified with the movement and work of the Shepherd himself, though, of course, in a particular place, like St. Matthew’s. Indeed, the flock’s existence in *one place* is the evidence of the Shepherd’s presence, hence why the life of the Church can’t be replaced by online-streaming services and such like. The Church is God’s “social work”—the creation of the flock, the “social work” of salvation itself.

The Church is, therefore, a social miracle whereby God gives birth to his own Body, the Church. This work he accomplishes by giving us our second-births in baptism, wherein we receive the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and are incorporated into the Church.

In a few moments, King David and King Dominion will be incorporated into this sheepfold in baptism. And, as “kids,” they are dependent on us, the elder sheep to learn how to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and learn what it means to follow him in discipleship — To trust him , right amidst the threats of the valley of the shadow. And, it is by the Spirit of Christ, given to each of us in baptism, that we are able to continually hear and respond to his voice. That the work of the Church necessarily involves each of us isn’t accidental then, but part of the very essence of the miracle of the Body of Christ. So, in just a bit, we will all gather around the font, around King David and King Dominion, and we will all make promises to them, that we will assist them in learning how to follow the Shepherd. And, the first words on their lives will be Jesus’ words, the word of grace, because for them, already, God has been their “Good Shepherd.”

The others, the substitutes, thieves, and robbers, those that seek to draw them away from Jesus, do not do what this Shepherd does. Jesus is different from all others in just this way—that he lays his life down for his sheep. Jesus is different because he loves his sheep, and he goes ahead of them, goes where no one else can go, going all the way to the Cross for us. So let us follow him, wherever he leads, the Good Shepherd, who has paved the way to life, and life abundant.

Amen.