

Sermon 4 Easter B, 2009

Shepherd of souls in love come feed us. Shepherd of souls, refresh and bless us. Amen.

I have been in many churches where the stained glass window behind the altar is of the Good Shepherd, with sheep gathered about his feet and one lamb cradled in his arms. Most of you have seen this familiar image of the Good Shepherd on cards and bookmarks and bulletin covers! But sometimes its very familiarity has tamed it. Sometimes we mistake this image for merely a sweet and sentimental picture.

Today we hear the real Good Shepherd story. We hear about a shepherd who is a **leader, a protector, a provider and a promise.**

We hear about a shepherd sent by God to lead and gather God's people. What we know from history is that there were many religious leaders who were supposed to be shepherds but instead they abused their authority or frittered it away. So, God sent Jesus, the faithful one, to shepherd God's flock himself. And, right away we see that the Good Shepherd story is about God's insistence that all people will have the guidance they deserve. They will not be left scattered and alone, bewildered

and aimless. Jesus, we are told in the gospels, had compassion on the people who were like sheep without a shepherd.

The metaphor of Jesus as Shepherd is a critique of the establishment- the **religious** leaders who are not faithful shepherds, on the one hand. And on the other hand, the **political** leaders who are not God. Some days you can follow both God and Ceasar and feel just fine. But, there will come a time- maybe a lot of times- when you have to choose between God and the empire. And this story reminds us that God is our leader. We follow the one with the shepherd's staff not the imperial crown!

And the Good Shepherd **protects** the flock from the wolves, from the evil around and about, the trouble within and without. The evils that would weaken and destroy the sheep will not be able to harm the flock of God. Despair, and utter hopelessness, being left to wander about in the dark, will never come to the flock of God because of the faithful love of our shepherd. Darkness and terror will be staved off by the shepherd's crook. The nameless, anonymous, isolated sense of having no place, no name, no one to belong to, will be forever taken away from us. The shepherd will call us by name. We belong in the intimacy of the fold, in the midst of the household of faith.

The shepherd **provides** for us. We do not need to hunger and thirst forever, as though there were no food and no water to satisfy us. God will provide food enough, grace enough, bounty pressed down and flowing over. The Shepherd will lay out for us a banquet. A banquet of God's word to eat and savor, a banquet of God's presence in the love and support of the community, a banquet of God's mercy in the strength we have to break bread with our enemies and those who have done us harm.

And what we are given is **a promise**, a banquet of God's promise in the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. When I distribute communion and say to each person: “the body of Christ, the bread of heaven,” I realize that one of us will be eating the bread of heaven **in heaven** before the rest of us. But today, we are all still eating on the way, walking on the pilgrim's path, eating the bread of today which is the promise of tomorrow, a tomorrow that will never come to an end. We eat the food of this earthly pilgrimage, week after week together. And we eat with bread the food of God's promise, of God's faithfulness. And in the bread of heaven we eat the food of our conviction that love is stronger than death, that God's faithfulness extends beyond the grave, that God's love will embrace us when our eyes open on the eternal day.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the flock. Jesus set his life aside for the life of the sheep. And while we remember and savor the love that led Jesus to Calvary, to a cross on Friday afternoon, at the same time we rejoice in the power of God that raised Jesus from the tomb on Easter morning. Thus, while we know that our shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep, we know as well that he has taken it up again, in victory, with alleluias, for time without end. And because we are lambs of his own flock, sheep of his own fold, sinners of his own redeeming, called by name, we know that we shall be like him in the age to come, alive in glory, because he has taken away from death its sting.

The Good Shepherd leads the sheep through brambles, across fertile plains, along running streams, confident and unafraid, and at the last, and at the beginning, the Good Shepherd leads us through the valley of death to the holy mountain of God. So our last journey through the valley of death we take with the shepherd. We do not walk that last walk alone. "Your rod and your staff they comfort me."

Each of us are sheep of the fold of Christ. Each of us is called by name, invited into the bosom of God's life, invited to sit at the hearth as befits children in the family. We are at home in the sheepfold, safe from dangers, surely, but not safe from tears, not safe from loss, not safe from

grief. But even in our sadness, we know with certainty that we are enfolded in the love of God and in the embrace of one another.

This is the true story of the Good Shepherd, not a warm and cuddly picture, but a strong protector, a guide and guardian, our food and our hope of life that will never end. So we gather in hope this morning, knowing that we are given one another for love and comfort and courage, knowing that God's grace and mercy will sustain us all our days long until God calls **our** name, and lifts us up in strong, protecting arms and gently carries us home.
Amen.