

Easter 4-A

April 13, 2008

The Good Shepherd

How many sheep are found in this church? Do you know? I counted 12 sheep (and 3 goats) the other day. The image of Jesus the shepherd is just so popular, it cannot be ignored. It is a very real way to grasp the relationship we have with Jesus.

The chapel where I went to Seminary is called the Chapel of the Good Shepherd. The altar is a great marble thing with a larger than life-size marble statue of Jesus behind it. In his right hand is a shepherd's crook, and his left arm his holding a lamb. The lamb is looking up at Jesus and Jesus is giving a caring look back at the lamb. Very gentle. Whenever we faced the altar, we were reminded of that caring role of Jesus.

It's the soft side of Jesus, like the one we see at Christmas. It is also the comforting image of Psalm 23 – the one Psalm we can remember either completely or whole verses at a time. The Psalm is recited frequently when we need to be reminded that we are not alone, that God is near and our guide in times of trouble. I think that's why it is so popular at funerals – a time when we know that the transition from this life to the next may be difficult without God as our guide.

So God becomes for us a guide, a guardian, a comforting presence when we are in danger.

What we don't consider in our 21st century urban minds is how difficult the job of a shepherd is. Hundreds of sheep, all going in separate directions munching away at grass. Wandering here and there, sometimes falling into danger either because of not paying attention, or being attacked by wild animals. We get some of that image back when we watch the sheep dog contests on TV, where a shepherd whistles and the dogs rein in the random behavior of the sheep.

For safety reasons, the sheep have to be able to listen to the shepherd. And the shepherd has to remain attentive to the animals. It requires an intimate connection between shepherd and sheep. At night, the shepherds of 2000 years ago would bring all their flocks into a common pen. Each morning, the shepherd would call for his flock and the sheep all knew who to follow back out into the pasture. Jesus knew that it was possible to be swayed by listening to the wrong people. But if we know his voice, then we will know what to do.

As Jesus puts it, "the sheep follow the shepherd, because they know his voice." "I am the shepherd."

Voices are very distinct. We recognize our friends and family, even over the phone. Each voice has its own volume, tone, speed, and rhythm. We know who we can trust by their voices. We know what emotions that people are expressing by their voices. I can remember each sound my parents made when they reacted to life around them. Laughter, anger, business, casual conversation, and of course, directed mostly to me, discipline.

The shepherd's voice has all the same unique cadences. And the sheep know not only the voice, but the message that the voice is sending. This image of a watchful shepherd, actually conversing with the sheep, in sound, direction, giving out alarms, gives us a different picture of a shepherd. One in which the voice gives comfort, yes, but also direction to the members of the flock.

What voices do you listen to? And why? Is it out of respect that you listen to some people more than others? I often find that there are certain people to get my attention more often than others. They are trustworthy and smart. Or they tell me something I want to hear. I certainly don't want to listen to voices that might want to correct my ideas or behavior.

But how do we know God from the false prophets we hear around us. We have, of course, a checklist: scripture and reason – two parts of the Anglican way of life. Jesus told us to love God and love our neighbor. And follow the 10 Commandments. Defending oneself is understandable, but leaders who ask us to kill in the name of God are not the voice of God – think the Crusades, or the religious wars in Ireland or former Yugoslavia. Taking land or peoples' rights away, not sharing wealth and justice throughout society is not listening to the voice of God. Leader who steal or create envy or jealous in others to prove who has power and control are not the voice of God.

If our leaders ask us to do something harmful to our neighbors, then I ask if they were truly speaking for God. Then is the time for prayer and listening for the real voice of God.

You know who did hear – and follow Jesus? The early Christian communities. Within the first 20 years of Jesus Resurrection, communities all over the Mediterranean Basin were acting out their love of neighbor as an extension of their love of God. We heard it in the reading from Acts. They lived together as one family in a kind of commune, giving up their wealth to support the whole group. Did all Christians do that? No. Paul wrote to the Corinthians and others to take up collections for the people in Jerusalem. So there were from the start those who acted as shepherds, stewards if you will, to the rest of the flock of Christians, giving them continuing support and encouragement, just as Jesus did for the flocks he identified as "his own."

So we are the sheep of God's pasture, the sheep of Jesus' flock, and at the same time we are the shepherds to others, keeping them within the safety of our care.

I would love to hear God's voice clearly. It would prove to me that God existed and that my faith was in something real. And then I realize that I already hear the voice of God. I hear it in the advice I get. I hear it when the same charity seems to be continually advertising or being talked about, one that I really am interested in but don't seem to have the time to get involved in.

I hear the voice of God in the encouragement of others.

We all hear the voice of God. It can be very subtle, it can move us out of our comfort zones. But more likely it is there to open doors, keep us safe, support us during bad times.

So even in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil. I know my shepherd, because I know he is intimately aware of me. So I come full circle back to the almost cute statue of Jesus and the lamb, and yes, even if not very realistic, it is a very comforting image to take into the valleys we enter everyday.