

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2021

(John 10:11-18)

Today is often referred to by the title “Good Shepherd Sunday,” a designation reflecting the imagery and terminology of shepherds in Psalm 23 and the passage from John’s Gospel.

Almost instinctively, when I hear the title “Good Shepherd” I flash back to my childhood and to the images of Jesus I remember seeing in various places, particularly one of Jesus as the smiling shepherd, joyfully carrying a young lamb on his shoulders. That image and others like it are comfortable ... and safe ... and reassuring ... and in their own way they have their value. Unfortunately, the safety and reassurance rooted in such portrayals glosses over the very real, inherent danger that was the work of 1st century Middle Eastern shepherds.

For them it wasn’t simply a matter of watching their flocks as they grazed in peaceful meadows, keeping count to make sure none wandered off. Theirs was a vocation in which they faced constant threats ... threats to the safety of the flock and even to themselves. They were the threats posed by other animals seeking to take away lambs for their own: wolves and lions; cheetahs and jackals. Indeed, theirs was a vocation in which they faced the very real danger of *losing their lives* as they guarded the lives of the creatures in their care. Theirs was a job that if taken with the seriousness it demanded could very well result in the possibility of self-sacrifice if it meant saving others.

As a huge fan of the original Star Trek franchise I think of the words spoken by Mr. Spock in the second film of the series that relate to this: “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one.”¹ Certainly we see the needs and safety of the many *and* the one at the heart of Jesus as the Good Shepherd ... the shepherd willing to offer up his own life to save the lives of each of us numbered in God’s flock.

I learned some very interesting facts about sheep as I was preparing this sermon. I learned that they are for instance naturally calm and social creatures, with an instinct to gather with other sheep. Loud noises cause them great distress. They form bonds of friendship and even look out for one another. They are comfortable with routine and possess very good memories, even being able to by some estimates to remember the faces of about 50 individual people or animals for up to two years.²

All of those sound very familiar, don’t they ... traits that we as human beings might see in ourselves and in those around us. They’re certainly a good reminder that while God tasks us with caring for creation, we ourselves are *not* the entirety of creation ... and feelings and emotions are not a market cornered exclusively by humans. Knowing now what I’ve learned about sheep, it has certainly given me a fresh perspective on my place as part of the flock for which Jesus laid down his life.

¹ Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan.

² Pulpit Fiction Podcast sermon notes for 4 Easter / April 25, 2021. <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter4b/#John10%3A11-18>.

But for as much as we are sheep in God's flock, I firmly believe we also are tasked with a call to be *shepherds*. So what about *us* and *our role* as shepherds ... shepherds for those in our families and for our friends, for those we don't know or haven't met yet, and even for – in the words of *The Book of Common Prayer* – “this fragile earth, our island home”?³ What are *we* prepared to do, not *if* someone calls for our help but rather *when*?

I recently had someone share with me their frustration and pain over witnessing the Church's perceived focus on itself as an institution rather than seeing the Church focusing on its mission. I heard a grief rooted in their witness to a bureaucracy, one focused on self-interest rather than the common good. I heard a grief rooted in their witness to a body focused on guidelines rather than goodness. To put it in the context of today's Gospel reading, I heard an expression of grief rooted in seeing a shepherd concerned *more* about saving themselves from the wolves and *less* about saving the flock.

I've thought a lot about that, and I've realized that out of the darkness of their pain and grief there is a small flicker of light glowing ... and *growing*. It is the light of someone who knows what a shepherd *is* and what a shepherd *should be* ... what a shepherd *does* and what a shepherd *can do*. Out of what they were sharing I heard a call: a call to each one of us to pick up our crooks and live into our role as shepherds for the flocks around us. The worst shepherds undoubtedly are those who operate in a realm of self-interest; it is their flocks that perish. What does it say to the world around us ... what does it say to sheep with long memories ... when the shepherd that is the Church is equally interested in its self-preservation?

There are many wolves and jackals in the world today coming from many directions ... the predators of addiction and abuse, loneliness and isolation, hunger and deprivation, racism and sexism, violence and degradation, waste and destruction. No two shepherds are alike; each is unique. But for each their call is the same: *to protect the flock*. How they did it may have been slightly different, but the task was the same. *We ... you and I ... are the Church*, and I firmly believe that we are each called in our own ways and using our own gifts to be shepherds to the world around us. We may wield our crooks differently or sense different ways we are called to act, but our mission is the same: *to protect the flocks with which we have been entrusted*.

We are most definitely called to lay down our lives for others. That doesn't mean martyrdom, as so many in the early church thought and rushed to accomplish. What it *does* mean is bearing witness to the Good News of God in Jesus ... of laying our lives down to ease the journey for others ... of driving the wolves of the world away from the fence line and pasture in which our sheep exist.

It means living into the call each of us has to be *a good shepherd* ... a call issued forth by *the Good Shepherd*.

Amen.

³ Eucharistic Prayer C. *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 370.