

Fourth Sunday of Easter – May 12 (Good Shepherd Sunday)

The fourth Sunday of Easter is always given over to the imagery of the Good Shepherd. This picture appears to have been precious to the people of God for a very long time, perhaps it was a familiar motif even when David penned those familiar words of Psalm 23 over three thousand years ago. Frequently the kings of ancient kingdoms would style themselves as a shepherd. Interestingly Amos uses that sort of king/shepherd language to identify himself when challenged (Amos 7:14-15). Perhaps he was a sheep mogul of some sort. Interestingly, David does not describe himself that way, but uses the more generic term “shepherd.”

Jesus of course uses this picture language to great effect in the Gospels. Some of the earliest images we have of Jesus involve this motif of the shepherd, usually carrying a lamb on his shoulders. The picture on the right is from a third century fresco in Italy. It depicts Jesus as a beardless, Roman shepherd, carrying a lamb on his shoulders.



This is also interesting for other reasons. The image of God as a shepherd was also applied to several of the Greek and Roman deities. The image above is styled after depictions of those Roman and Greek shepherd-gods. This suggests that in the first centuries of its existence Christianity was aggressively co-opting the culture. They saw the images and the icons of the dominant culture as a potential opportunity for them to use and appropriate for their own purposes. It would be a little like us watching every movie for an opportunity to baptize some character or motif. Do we watch popular television and see that Jesus is like the zombie hunters? Do we see him in the physicians on the hospital drama?

The preacher today has to struggle a little with the depiction of Jesus as Good Shepherd. Even though we are no longer an agrarian culture for the most part, the image retains a great deal of impact for people. Yet, who among us has the slightest idea what being a shepherd is like first hand? This distance from the shepherd has not prevented the image of Jesus the good shepherd from being plastered on the walls of countless day cares and preschools operating in church basements. It adorns our Sunday School materials and it is name of many a Lutheran parish. (I vicared at First Good Shepherd Lutheran in Las Vegas.)

In the past we asked if there was not some contemporary equivalent which might be more familiar to our people. We could not find a good one. A drill instructor in a basic training is perhaps the most like a shepherd. A parent, a teacher, a coach, but all of them seemed to us to be somewhat problematic. No single example actually succeeded, we thought perhaps it would take several different metaphors to communicate what the text meant by calling Jesus “Good Shepherd.”

The image is a proclamation of the Easter truth. Jesus has risen from the dead and he is not just listening to angelic choirs today. He is caring for you. He is watching out for you. He loves you. That is not a past or a future statement, but a present statement. Jesus has risen from the dead so he can take care of his sheep. This seemed like an important preaching point to us. Too often we are functionally deists in the way we think about God. He is there, he is real, but he is far away, at best watching, but not doing anything in my life today..

All folks are looking for something real and that something seems to us to be something that fills the Jesus shaped hole that occupies the center of every human life. Have we allowed them to imagine that the resurrected Christ is not there to fill that hole? Have we preached a Jesus who is far away, a long distance shepherd? The man who joins a gang, the woman who has an affair, the guy who is descending into a drug induced haze, are all looking for something, and that that same need and hunger is present is all of us too. They are not different from us in this, but we are blessed to have that hole filled by Christ, the same Christ who would fill their hearts and lives as well. Is this perception that Jesus is truly absent the reason we see so many young people departing from faith and checking the “none” box on the census form when it asks about religion?

For people today this might just be a really good Sunday. In a time of poor news from every sector it seems, this might be a most welcome ray of sunshine. Jesus rose from the dead to take care of you. Of course, that might also lead some folks to question just how good he is at this if all this garbage is taking place in our world. But the promise is not that he will keep us in the comfortable confines of the sheep pen, but that he will go with us when we walk the valley of the shadow of death. He seeks out the foolish and lost sheep, but in that time before they are found it is often pretty uncomfortable for the little lost ovine.

It should also not be forgotten that the shepherd carries that long staff, often with a crook in it. Yes, he uses it to fend off the predator that would devour the sheep, but most often it is used to pull an errant sheep back in line or even to deliver a whack where it would do the most good. The tender care of the shepherd may leave us rather tender at times. This will not be perceived as enjoyable in the midst of it, but in retrospect the sheep will consider that this too was the love of God in his or her life.

If you want a helpful and very brief read consider Phillip Keller’s *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*. He offers some interesting insights into just what it is like to be a shepherd. Not being one myself, more of a gardener and cattle person by upbringing, I cannot really comment on the veracity of all his insights, but they make some really good sermonic material. I had sheep farmers in my parish in Roseburg and they said that much of this was true.

Here are some thoughts I gleaned from the book and put out there for you last year:

1. Sheep are not dumb, they are in fact pretty smart. But they cannot see very well. So they often will not be aware that a gate is open. The shepherd will have to physically grab one of them, lift them through the gate before the flock will enter.
2. Sheep can hear quite well – able to identify the voice of a shepherd. Hence God does not say to us, “see this and live” but instead he says “hear this and live.” The preached word is a “heard” experience (pardon the pun).
3. Sheep need a fair amount of care – they need still waters and green pastures and it takes the consistent care of a shepherd to bring them to these places. Sheep will drown in running water, they will graze a pasture to the roots if left in one place consistently. They also are too indiscriminate in what they eat, a shepherd constantly has to be looking out for poisonous plants.
4. Sheep are ungulates, which mean they have multiple stomachs which are used to digest the cellulose that we cannot digest. This is a very gassy process and a sheep that lies down improperly will be “cast” or “cast down.” This means that the gasses in their stomachs have built up in their abdomen and they literally cannot get up. They roll on their backs with their feet in the air. Such a sheep is vulnerable to predators. (If you are familiar with cattle who have the same sort of digestive system, this is called “bloating”) This means a shepherd must constantly count his sheep and be aware of how many there are (“if you have 99 and lose one” – she probably laid down wrong and is just over the knoll and cannot get up.)

There is much more that you could find. A good preacher, even if he is in a city where people have never seen a sheep will want to sound a little like a shepherd today. In fact, that is what “Pastor” means.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Almighty God, merciful Father... notice that the resurrection is actually an act of the Father in the economy of salvation. Today we notice that he has awakened the great good shepherd of the sheep. There is purposefulness to the resurrection which is often lost on us. We properly celebrate the fact that the resurrection is really about us rising from death on the last day and we acknowledge that our baptism ties us to the resurrected Christ right now, empowering a resurrection of our spiritual self. But there is more good news to the resurrection. Jesus rose from the dead for a purpose, because he had a job to do right now, today. That job could not be done if he lay dead in a grave.

His glorified, perforated hands are now engaged in a holy task. He cares for us. He is not simply sitting on his throne listening to the angelic chorus' version of celestial top forty tunes, drumming his fingers, waiting for the grand finale on the last day. He is actively engaged in the shepherding of his people. The Spirit mediates his presence among us and that presence is active, engaged, and potent for the salvation of His people. He hears our bleating prayers and responds to them. He calls us to safety. He provides the healing balm of Word and Sacrament, he puts us into the flock so that we can be comforted and protected by the group as well. He is not absent, but very present in our sheepish existence.

We beseech God for the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we can hear and recognize the voice of our shepherd as he calls us by name. We would follow him. This section of the prayer introduces another element that shows up in John. There are imposters and thieves, those who would harm the flock. There are so many imposters. They are also calling and making their presence known. Yes, like wolves they would consume and destroy, but they know that if they can through some deceit lead a whole flock into a box canyon the feasting can go on for days. If they just run in and grab an occasional lamb, they will incur the immediate wrath of the shepherd and the sheep will become wary. This prayer is about Spirit-directed discernment. Of course if the person is immersed in the Word, he will know the Word made flesh. But ultimately we cannot lay this on the proficiency of the human being. We are just too messed up to think that we will get this straight.

It also implies that we know the voice of Jesus. I have found this to be a tough thing for people, one which can needlessly lead them to doubt. The real answer here is one of purest Gospel. God gives us that recognition in his Holy Spirit. But that said, the doubts are also reasonable. After all, it has been two thousand years since Jesus walked the earth with his disciples. The generation which would have recognized Jesus voice has long passed away. But this is not about recognizing the timbre of his voice. Did Jesus speak with a deep voice or a high voice? Who knows, we will find that out. But we can still recognize the one who through various Pastors, teachers, fellow Christians, parents, and others has been nurturing and feeding us with Word, love, forgiveness, and peace. Because the Spirit dwells within us, the one who comes speaking with that sweet voice is not beyond our recognition. There is something like a little alarm bell which the Spirit installs in the back of a Christian's mind in Baptism. When the evil one comes, stalking his next victim, he will attempt to sound like the good shepherd, but we can recognize him. Mostly this is so because he is just stupid about love. He doesn't understand it, and he always stumbles when he tries to fake that. It would also seem that community is pretty important here. The Church is a great gift to us for this discernment. We don't go off following a voice alone, but we bring it to the brothers and sisters in Christ.

The preacher today will also want to ask what it means to be a sheep following Jesus. That is not an image that many will find to be flattering. We often enjoin people not to be sheep. It is perceived as a mindless and stupid thing to do, to be a sheep, following someone "blindly." How

will we preach this in a way which values the intelligence of our people, the discernment and gifts they exercise in this following? How will we ask them to be under the shepherd, but not a shepherd who takes away their brains, but one which unleashes their minds to be in service to him? Is that not just as much a following of the Good Shepherd? I believe it is.

And so we wonder how we will say this today. We struggled a bit with this prayer. The text says we hear his voice and he knows us, but the prayer says that we know him. While this is not mutually exclusive, it seems that that the emphasis is critical. The relationship which enables me to follow is not me getting the discernment right, but it is Jesus knowing me. That creates the relationship.

Can we point to the things which are all around us right now and point to the shepherding work of Christ? Am I on this bus right now because my shepherd leads me to this moment so I can talk to the guy who is next to me? Do we point to the wonderful things of life and see his shepherding care? Do we pray for parking places in the grocery store lot? We are very good at talking about the historical realities of the Biblical witness, we are very good at pointing to a future hope in heaven, but in fact much preaching in the NT is a testimony to things which these men saw themselves. No witness can tell what another saw, only what he or she has seen. To what will we point our congregants and say, "Look, there's Jesus right now." We need to be able to see him ourselves if we are going to do that, if we would be his contemporary witnesses. In what things of this life, in what events, can we say that we have seen his hand active and working as a shepherd in my life?

Too often we have let the Schwaermer and their testimonials define the conversations. "We are Lutherans, and that means we don't talk like they do." But that sort of attitude has silenced too much of our witness. Jesus is the Shepherd, right now, he is actively and winsomely and beautifully at work in my life. I can bear witness to that, in fact, I am called to bear witness to that.

Readings

Acts 20:17-35

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them:

"You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,

²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await

me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

At first blush, this may seem like an odd passage to have on a day dedicated to the Good Shepherd, but in truth it makes a great deal of sense. Luke has been asserting the presence of Christ in the Christian community, in the people who love, serve, preach, teach, and more. They have given the lame to walk, opened the eyes of the blind, cast out demons, and raised the dead. In fact, in the very verses which precede this account of Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus, he raises the young man who falls from the window. In doing that he looks a great deal like Jesus himself. Of course it is not all healing and the like. When the first Christians die, it is with the words of Jesus on their lips. When they are persecuted, Jesus says it is he who is persecuted.

Now, Paul preaches a farewell sermon to the folks in Ephesus. This is excellent shepherding, but it is not really Paul tending the flock, but it is really Christ through him. Of course, Paul speaks these words, and yes, any preacher can err, but through preachers and pastors, Christ continues to shepherd his flock.

Consider what Paul tells them. He has suffered with them, lived with them. He has given them the words they needed to hear. Now, constrained by the Spirit, obedient to the Overshepherd, he is heading to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen. You can almost hear his heart breaking for these people he is leaving. You can almost hear his heart breaking at the thought of being apart from them. He loves them. Ephesus is the city in which he has spent more time as a preacher than any other single city, at least as far as we know.

He knows, perhaps by the prompting of the Spirit, perhaps simply because he can see the forces that are lining up against him, but he knows that he will not get to see them again. And he cannot resist the last opportunity to teach, admonish and remind them. He is the shepherd to the end. This is not just a farewell party for Paul, it is his last chance to teach them something and he will

not be denied. He will lead this flock to the green pastures of God's Word and the still waters of His love.

Paul speaks of the integrity of his ministry, knowing that his own word is the effective tool of God. If his character has been impugned, he cannot really teach. I think this has volumes to speak to us today as Catholicism continues its long penitential season in light of the clerical abuse scandals that are besetting it. What is really at stake in much of this is the authoritative and pastoral voice of Roman Catholicism. Before we get too denominationally sanctimonious about this, we have to realize that the only reason the media is not focused on the many abuses in Lutheran institutions, is that we don't have the money to be sued, and for the most part we have already sacrificed our moral authority to an ill-conceived desire to "fit" into the current culture. We have largely already lost it, especially when we take Lutheranism as a whole. Catholicism is in the sights of the media today because it has taken principled stands on moral issues.

What this means is that we are largely without a moral authority in the lives of people, and if we preach from that perspective, we will only come off sounding shrill and anything but prophetic. We will be risible. Rather, I think we need to return to what Paul says at the beginning of this text. He served, he wept with them, and he loved them. It is only in that relationship that we have any authority to be heard or heeded.

But thus has Christ lived among us. He has not shirked the duty or the dirty, but has been numbered among us transgressors, cared for the little, least, and lost. He has walked our dusty roads; he has come to our wedding feasts, fished with us, and grieved at gravesides with us. Finally he has died with us.

Now the risen Christ speaks.

We wondered if this would not lead some of our people to wonder if we were leaving like Paul. But really, the sermon based on this text should point to the ministry which is happening right now as the ministry of Christ. 40 years ago, who would have thought that an LCMS congregation could be served by a licensed deacon? But today, Christ has provided for his people. He is shepherding now in new ways and caring for you his flock.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

This is a great day to preach the psalm. You could just let the psalm provide the outline for a message that reads a few verses, preaches, explains and applies it, and then reads the next verse or two and does the same.

Revelation 7:9-17 (I have included the preceding verses in the chapter because they are important for reading the verses we do have.)

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ² Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." ⁴ And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

⁵ 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,
12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,
12,000 from the tribe of Gad,

⁶ 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,
12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,
12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,

⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,
12,000 from the tribe of Levi,
12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,

⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,
12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,
12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice,

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ “Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

A cross referenced Bible will be really interesting here. Matthew 24 and 25 will lead you to a really interesting place. So will John 10.

Some years ago as we dealt with this text we were confronting the horror of the Boston Marathon bombings. We thought that the Good Shepherd who wiped away every tear would preach. Will that still preach in this year? Three years ago on Easter morning a park filled with celebrating Christians was bombed in Pakistan. This year churches and hotels in Sri Lanka were likewise bombed. But that seems so far away. It has not gotten traction in our media. Are the tears being wiped away being wept for things much closer to home?

Revelation has been the source of so many really strange and frankly bizarre teachings inside the Christian tradition, you can see why some have simply taken the approach that we should ignore it. Indeed, most Christians have studiously avoided this book. The seventh chapter of Revelation is the scene of one of the more spectacular errors in theology as the section immediately before this enumerates the “saved” at 144,000. Of course, the Jehovah’s Witness, who come from the same upstate New York movement of the 1830’s which spawned the Seventh Day Adventists, LDS, and a number of other bodies have made a great deal of this. I wonder if this is why we have elected start this reading here and not at the beginning of the chapter.

Perhaps we need to contextualize a little more. John writes to comfort people. He is not writing to make them afraid. They are already very much afraid. He is writing to make people less afraid. He does this by describing what is happening to the persecuted people of Asia Minor,

giving it a name, “monster” and then portraying its ultimate destruction at the hands of God. He does not tell them not to be afraid, or that they have nothing to fear. That would be either cruel or simply wrongheaded. John does manage their fear; he puts it into a context. He does this because fear is fully capable of consuming a person, overwhelming him or her.

Another thing John seems to be doing is telling the story of the world from different perspectives. Last week, when we read in chapter 5, he was describing the perspective of the throne of God. It was as if we were a spider hanging on the chandelier in God’s throne room. What would have we seen there? From that perspective, God only saw the people who were singing his song of praise. The rest were simply “off the radar.”

In chapter 6 and 7 and into chapter 8, he is opening the seals on the book of life. As is the case throughout the book, the number seven shows up here in seven seals. In the Hebrew world view, the number seven was a number that connoted completeness or totality. Thus with the opening of the seven seals, they are all opened, this is the complete opening of the book of life. With each seal another thing takes place. At the opening of the first four, another horseman rides out. There is war, there is conquest, there is famine, and there is death. The saints cry out from under the altar and the earth endures cataclysms.

Between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seals is what many commentators call an interlude. Quite often the interlude is comprised of two things, as we have here. The sixth element in these visions is usually the most dire of them, it is what happens right before the end. The seventh element is always the end, the closure of this particular perspective on the world’s history. Our text is the second element of the interlude. It seems to be a picture of the people of God. The first element, vs 1-8, has the people arrayed in a military structure, 12,000 in each tribe, thus the 144,000. These numbers need to be heard symbolically. 10 is the Greek number for completeness, and 12 is the number of the people of God. When the numbers are multiplied, they are intensified. Thus $10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 12 \times 12 = 144,000$ is a really intense form of completeness, all the people of God, not one left out, every last single of them.

This marshaled group of people, the treasures of God, is the origin of the name “The Church Militant” which often refers to the Church on earth. At least the interpretation of this element in Revelation is the origin of that term.

Our section of the interlude to which we are paying attention is the source of the corresponding division of the Church, the Church at rest, or the Church triumphant. Now, the weapons are laid aside and the host of God is no longer arrayed for battle, but the picture here is of white robed multitudes from every race, tribe, and nation. They have palm fronds in their hands, the sign of peace in the ancient world. When a king came to a city, the people would hold out palm branches to welcome him in peace, the alternative to palm fronds would be weapons!

These are now gathered around the throne of God which made its appearance in chapters 4-5 and they sing the same song which the hosts of heaven and earth sang in that vision. Thus the reading from last week and this week are tied together.

The preacher may well want to focus his attention on the little conversation which John has with one of the 24 elders who are around that throne. John is apparently granted access to the very inner circles of this scene. Who are these clothed in white? It is important for John and his audience to get this right. These are the saints of God who have come out of the tribulation, washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

His description of their heavenly state would have seemed like the Promised Land to a people in persecution. Recently baptized they might have been questioning the benefits of that washing, especially if they were being persecuted for being Christians. It might not have seemed like such a good idea in retrospect. But this description of those who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb would have been potent.

They will be sheltered by his protection, they will not hunger nor thirst, they will dwell securely and he shall wipe away every tear. For folks who are hiding, being arrested, left out in the brutal Mediterranean sun to die of exposure or who are weeping for their lost friends and fellow Christians, this was good news indeed. The persecution will come to an end. This is not the way it will always be. Indeed, the picture here is one of intimacy. They are always before God. They are not in some corner of heaven, toiling away on the back forty like dutiful servants, they are right there, in front of the king. They are on an intimate relationship. I think we often take it for granted that Jesus has encouraged us to pray to God by calling him Father (Daddy!).

For the reader today, however, we have a bit of a challenge. We simply don't have the same attitude as a persecuted community might have. We have, since the days of Constantine, lived in a world in which the state has tolerated and even promoted Christianity. Perhaps we have members of our parishes who have come out of such circumstances and perhaps they ought to be the ones who help us understand these words. The most profound sermons on Revelation came from Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he was imprisoned before his execution. I would love to hear this described by a persecuted African, Iranian, or Indian Christian.

But the individual Christian may feel like persecution has struck them. Or they may also feel the oppression of some affliction of the body or mind. Cancer, ALS, or Schizophrenia can be a terrible persecutor of a human being. And while it is not a state persecution, it can imprison you, oppress you, and discourage you nonetheless. It is also the wicked fruit of Eden's rebellion just the same and the handiwork of our evil foe. Are many of our people terrified of dementia? One of the Tuesday night group spoke of a woman who had been suffering with dementia for years. No one could understand her at all, except when she sang hymns. Then her voice was clear. Jesus the good shepherd, risen from the dead, was tending his lamb through the valley of death and its shadow. This woman has since died. Now he has dried all those tears and she is at rest, whole once more, before the throne of God. That has legs to preach. John's promise to the people that

this suffering will not always define them, but that there is peace on the other side of this suffering is powerful worthy of preaching this day as well.

John 10:22-30 *Again, for contextual reasons, I have included a few verses on either side of this.*

¹⁹ *There was again a division among the Jews because of these words.* ²⁰ *Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?”* ²¹ *Others said, “These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”*

²² *At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter,* ²³ *and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon.* ²⁴ *So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”* ²⁵ *Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me,* ²⁶ *but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.* ²⁷ *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.* ²⁸ *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.* ²⁹ *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.* ³⁰ *I and the Father are one.”*

³¹ *The Jews picked up stones again to stone him.*

This text is occasioned by a question from the Jews who want Jesus just to come out with it and declare his intent. He has been walking around calling himself the “son of man.” There is ambiguity in that statement, however, and that ambiguity was critical. The prophet Ezekiel had used the term to mean that he was simply another mortal. Daniel, on the other hand, had meant the anointed one, the anticipated Messiah. Which way does Jesus mean it? He won't reveal this until his trial when he will clearly identify himself with the Son of Man who descends on the clouds, the Daniel reference. Right now, ambiguity serves Jesus' purposes. I think sometimes we forget that Jesus was the one who created human beings and he is fully capable of manipulating them. He knows what makes us tick.

Jesus, instead of giving a clear answer, directs them to his signs, his deeds. If they were of his flock, they would see them for what they are. Since we are of his flock, John clearly thinks that we should be able to read them here and believe. It is the very purpose of this book, John 20:30-31.

His sheep hear his voice. Jesus knows them, and they follow him. Notice the order of that little sequence. His voice goes out, they hear it, but the effect of them hearing is not that they know him, but that he knows them. That is the important question here. His knowing them means they follow him. Isn't it absolutely amazing how often we don't get those backwards? We imagine that our following somehow draws his attention, somehow makes us known to him. But it is his voice that makes us his, he knows us first, then we are followers.

Once the relationship is established, Jesus begins to speak of what that means. He gives them eternal life thus they never perish. They are secure, no one can snatch them from His hand. The Father who has all the power, who is greater than them all, he protects them. And Jesus and the Father are one.

It is good to be in the hand of God. But as always when we come to these texts, we have to do so in the context in which we live as well. I have had the most interesting conversations with my Renaissance and Reformation students as we discussed Calvinism. It was amazing to me just how deeply imbued with the language of power they were. It was all about power, and power results in a theology which has to believe in a double predestination and its attendant perseverance of the saints. But while this seems to be the logical outgrowth of this passage, it isn't. The hand of God is not a fist, clenched in power, but it is the outstretched palm of God's gift. One can walk off it, and Satan continually would tempt us to put our faith in anything else and so to journey off that hand. He cannot snatch us from that place. He cannot exert his power against God and prevail, but he can deceive the sheep, he can tempt us still. We need the active shepherding work of Christ, he still gives.

But the preacher will most likely want to discuss the promise that is made to us today in that the one who hears, is known, and follows, that one in God's hand will never perish, he has eternal life. Notice the tense of the verbs here, this is not a future promise, this is not a reality to which we look forward, but it is a truth Jesus speaks about us right now. We are now in the hand of God.

Here is a fun way to run with this. We noted above that in verse 27 that the sheep hear the voice but the result is that Jesus knows them. We would expect that it would be me who knows the one speaking, but oddly, it is in the act of hearing, of sound waves impacting on my eardrum, that I am known to Jesus. Remember that he is the Word – when the word impacts my ears is it not Jesus himself who comes into me, to change me, to make of me a follower? Is this verse perhaps a really interesting way to talk/preach the theology of the Word? Does Jesus enter the hearer through this proclamation, knowing them intimately, turning them around, creating the following and faithful sheep we are called to be? If you want to see a master handle this, consider Augustine's sermon #187 which he preached on Christmas Day and reflected on the incarnation of the Word.

Law

1. Death is such a cruel foe. It not only mercilessly pursues me, but it pursues my friends and others as well. It leaves enormous holes in the lives of the people who are left to grieve and carry on without them. The folks in Ephesus grieved to hear that Paul would not ever see them again. John wrote to folks who were being killed and whose pastors and leaders were being hunted down. Jesus' own words only make sense in a context of death. It says after he said these words they picked up stones to kill him.

2. And there is just nothing we can do about this enemy of ours. We are helpless before it. The grave's ravenous maw sucks us all in, there is no avoiding it.
3. Jesus speaks of eternal life, and I know I am supposed to believe that, and I look around me and see my fellow Christians bravely responding with "He is risen indeed, Alleluia!" but I have to tell you that I have my doubts, and there are days when I am not so sure. Am I faithless? Am I lost?
4. My doubts lead me to the dark feeling that I am alone, that I have no hope, and I am incredibly vulnerable. In short I am afraid and fear destroys me.
5. My enemy feeds on those fears, he desires them, and uses them against me. I am a helpless blob of protoplasm before his power. My feeble mind and powers are no match for him.

Gospel

1. Christ has died and risen never to die. He never leaves us. Mediated through his Christian people, when I bid a friend farewell and lower his casket into the grave, I am saying goodbye to a man who has forgiven me, who has loved me, who has taught, or helped me. In him I encountered Christ, but the same Jesus has not died with him, but is now found in the loving Christian who lays his or her hand on my shoulder to comfort me on that day. There is one hole which death cannot make.
2. And what is more, Jesus promises you and me today that he dries every tear, even the tears of grief we weep at gravesides. His resurrection means that he has mastery over death and its hold over me has been broken. I will succumb, my friends will all succumb, but he has already broken that bondage and in baptism I have been given an eternal life that lives and does not die.
3. Jesus does not predicate his gift to me on my faith, but on his word, his knowledge of me, his love for me, and the death he died on the cross. My own doubts may be a sign of my weakness, but not his. My doubts in fact simply attest to the fact that I need the loving care my shepherd affords me every day. He never stops loves me.
4. And that means I am never alone. I am one with the Church at rest. I am singing songs of praise with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. I am in God's very hand, and no, not Satan himself, can pluck me from that place.
5. And so Jesus stands at my side, with shepherds staff and mighty hand, fending off the assaults of my foe. He leads me to the cool still waters and the green pastures of His Word and Sacraments, to the friends and congregants who love me and support me.

Sermon Ideas

1. Salvation belongs to the Lamb (Revelation: That the hearer would trust Jesus, in the midst of suffering and grief, and raise his/her voice to sing praise to the Lamb.)

John's people were being put through a terrible experience, a real meat grinder. They were looking at the brutality of persecution and death. John, in a vision, goes to heaven and has a conversation with one of the 24 elders who are constantly worshiping near the throne of the Almighty. From that perspective he sees the whole world through new eyes. In the first part of the chapter he has seen the church militant, but here we get a vision of the church at rest, the church triumphant.

For John's people, and for us, this is comfort. There is an end to suffering. Jesus wipes away every tear. That does something to my suffering. The terror of pain is often found in the fear that this will never end. John stands at the end and gives us a picture of it. The preacher will want to spend some time thinking about what this looks like. If you have spent time by some saint's bed while they were actively dying, rest is something to be longed for. Dying is hard work. But perhaps you and your parish are working on some great project. It will be important for the preacher to connect this to the lives your people are leading here. The entry point it seems would be the great suffering, pain, weariness, or other thing which is oppressing your people. Perhaps it is the political campaign? 😊

The Gospel in this sermon will come as you unpack the picture which John paints of the church at rest. John connects this to the reading last week by having these people join in the new song which the whole creation sings in response to the Lamb who was slain opening the seals. Now the seals are being opened, there is only one left, the whole brutal history of the world has unfolded with all the painful detritus of sin. Before the last seal is opened, before the end of the world, John wants us to see this picture, this image of what God has in mind for the people who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, who have been baptized.

¹⁵“Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

In the prior scene the enumeration of these people was at the edge, before the throne were the elders, the strange angels, the myriads of other angels, and the lampstands. But now, before the Lamb and the throne, lounging around the great crystal sea are these precious ones of God. They are always before him. They are protected by his presence. No harm can befall them here.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

If you live in Las Vegas, Phoenix, or a similar sort of place, you know what this means. The Mediterranean sun is brutal. For people who are being forced into refugee situations, perhaps by persecution in the ancient world, the sun would have been a real enemy. A home meant a place to get out of the sun and into the shade. There you would have had resources. A persecuted person would have been forced to leave all that.

The hunger and thirst of the first line might seem pretty self-evident, but imagine facing hunger and thirst. Not many of us do that or perhaps have ever done so, at least not real hunger or real thirst. The first pang of hunger, if we even get to that point, sends us to the refrigerator. We carry our water bottles around with us and drink whenever we want.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

The image shifts here to a shepherd who leads the sheep to a spring of living water. That phrase simply worth a search on Biblegateway. Particularly think of John 4 with the woman at the well and then Jesus’ words in the temple in John 7.

It is the final image which I think makes this text so applicable to any time and place. Jesus wipes away the tears. We all shed them. If you connected with the people in the first part above, you have given them cause to remember the tears, perhaps shed a few, and Jesus comes to wipe them all away. Good news!

2. “They hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me... They are in my Father’s hand.” (That the hearer would in hearing this sermon simply hear the voice of Christ, be known to him, and in being known, follow him.)

This is a sermon about being, not doing. We often fall into the trap of thinking that we are somehow worthy sheep if we get the faith thing right or if we somehow meet some spiritual standard, but this Gospel text really does not speak of us that way. It is Jesus voice which makes us his sheep, he knows us, not that we know him. Yes, we follow him, but that is after he has made us his flock. Jesus the Word, is the call itself. When it hits the eardrums, he comes into us and knows us. He establishes the relationship. He holds us in his hand, protecting and guarding us even now from vicious and deceitful foes.

This sermon is really the proclamation of a blessed state. It will suffer from perhaps a lack of tension or exhortation to action. But the text leads this way and truly the person who internalizes this, who “faiths” this in relationship with Jesus will also follow him

into lives of service, love, sacrifice, and bearing witness as Jesus bears witness today to the action of the father.

I heard Jim Nestigen speak once and he did marvelous job of discussing the “grammar of evangelism.” It starts with God, Jesus as the subject of the verbs. He does the action here, not me. It involves me and the people to whom I am speaking as the object of the verbs. He does something to us. It is always in the present tense, not the past, not the future, but the right now. Thus the evangelistic witness always centers on Christ. “I am a follower of Jesus. He led me here today to tell you that he loves you.” Christ in the driver’s seat in that conversation, it relies upon him. You are speaking those words to your congregation this day with this sermon, and equipping them to go forth and speak them to others.

3. Leading to all things profitable (Acts 20:20 That the Holy Spirit encourage the hearer to trust the ministry of Christ.)

Paul uses a very interesting word to describe his ministry to the people in Ephesus. He reminds them of the challenges they faced but he also says that he has not “shrunk” from preaching and teaching them the “profitable things.” The word for “profitable” there is a compound of the word “together” and “carry” in much the same way that “profit” is a compound of “pro” and the Latin word for make/do “facio, facere, feci.” In Greek this is a business term, the idea is that we both contribute something, perhaps you a skill and another person some capital and together you prosper.

What I am trying to say is that Paul is using a very normal business term to describe what he has been preaching. This is not a spiritual, ethereal, otherworldly language, but the language of people who are trying to make a business go, a living, to put bread on the table and clothes on their backs. Paul understands his preaching and teaching to be practical in this world, not just the next.

We are walking a difficult path here with deep ditches on either side. On one side we have the prosperity gospel sorts who proclaim a Jesus who is something like a utility or a financial advisor. Put the faith/work in and out comes the blessing. But on the other hand is an equally deep ditch in which we divorce Jesus from any blessing whatsoever for this life, focusing solely on the next life. While our people suffer now we speak of unspeakable joys to come and end up saying nothing.

Jesus, the great Good Shepherd, has risen from the dead because he is concerned about his people right now. Religion, broadly construed, has always been concerned about the lives of people. Jesus has not founded a different sort of religion in that respect. He cares about people. Don’t be afraid to sound like other voices. Be concerned to sound like Jesus.

We are encouraging people to trust the voice of Jesus through the ministration of the Church which he founded at Pentecost and which has cared for and about for nearly 2000

years. It leads us to lives of thriving and blessing. Its admonitions to be faithful spouses and loving parents and honest citizens are pointing us to lives which are substantively better than the debauched and sin-defined lives our libido, greed, and self-centered nature would otherwise take us.

Paul preached to them that which was profitable. The preacher may want to just peruse and grab some passages from the second parts of Paul's several letters. He gives much advice to slaves, spouses, citizens, and others. Paul preached what was profitable because Jesus cared about the lives of the people who read those letters, even you.

This sermon is trying to give some shape and form to the ministry of the Good Shepherd which is too often ignored. The hearer who takes this to heart will see that the admonitions and rules, which the old man hated so, are in fact blessings and gifts of the risen Christ to us. He really does want what is best for us, in this broken world. Do we always follow his advice, of course not! And we often pay a price in misery. The loving shepherd who gave his life for our sins is not rejecting on that account, he goes looking for the lost and wayward sheep, and he calls us back to a path. The thief comes only to kill and destroy. Jesus has come that we may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

4. Jesus the Good Shepherd (This sermon might simply walk right through the 23rd psalm and perhaps read Kellerman's text and explain the psalm)

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Jesus makes this reality in our baptism and in his establishment of a relationship with us. He makes a promise to you and me to enter into this relationship with us in which he takes a responsibility, to watch, keep, feed, nourish, guard, and protect us. We can confess with David that this is sufficient. There is so much that I might say "I want" or even "I need" The sheep of his pasture will turn those requests to the shepherd.

God is a really good shepherd, he knows what he is doing in this regard. Look at what he has provided for me? Has he spared even his own son for the sake of this wayward flock? I lack nothing in his care.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

The shepherding work of Christ is active and present today. He leads us to the places of nourishment and safety. See the intro article, but sheep are rather high maintenance in this regard, and so are we. There are real dangers out there and he is leading us to the life giving places in this world, to our family, to our church, to the one with words of forgiveness and love and comfort on my day of need. He puts the Scriptures in my hand. He brings me to quiet places where I may be safe.

He restores my soul – my life is salvaged. He leads me to righteous places, places where his beautiful intend for my life can be lived, in part or in full. We experience his real joy in the loving marriage, in the friendship, in the places where I may actual keep these commandments, not just ‘not break’ them, but where I may also be a person of integrity, love, joy, and service.

All this is for his name’s sake. This is not because I am so valuable or good or because I have something to prove. He does this all for his own name’s sake, just because that is the sort of God he is.

⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

This should be pretty easy to preach. Steve remembers the day his life was spared when a clerk kept him off a road minutes before a terrible accident would have perhaps destroyed him and his family. How many times do I miss this sort of thing? I will walk through the valley of the shadow of death eventually though, and even on that day, will never be alone. He has already walked that road, he knows every pot hole, he knows every hazard. He will hold my hand even when I am too weak to hold his anymore. I fear no evil on that day. He is with me.

The comforting rod and staff of Jesus is two fold, he beats off the foe, and he disciplines me. But I find his love behind both events and experiences. He pulls me back from the precipice, perhaps with a bit of pain to keep me from the greater pain. The hebrew word for comfort is much more complex than we are used to thinking. He might just wack me on the head.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Here we almost need to talk sacramentally, do we not. God prepares a table before our eyes today, in the presence of enemies and friends. Death lurks, age creeps, but today I

dine with saints and sing with angels. My head is anointed with the holy oil of heaven and I am abundantly blessed. My life is not merely full, it overflows. I have gifts to spare, gifts to give. My life is an overflowing life.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

Here is the grand finale. We are shepherded by Christ – now and forever. Goodness and mercy follow me, always. There is no place in which God cannot bless me. And there is no sin which will not be met with his mercy.

I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. This needs little or no explanation.

5. He dries every tear (that the hearer would rejoice in the presence of Christ who loves them and has given them eternal life in their baptism and is present in their life today, dry their tears, feed them, love them.)

This sermon wants to attach the shepherding ministry of Christ today to the everyday and real issues that people face. We tend to see Jesus as a solution for abstract moral issues, guilt, and future death, but he is right here right now because he cares about your right here, right now life.

He shed his real live red blood on a cross so that he could wash away your sins your baptism and join you in this journey called life. He leads and journeys with us to a place called heaven, where the sun shall not strike us by day nor the moon by night. But in this mean time, we are quite subject to the vagaries of life, the persecutions of the enemy, the death of friends and family, the withering of old age, and the exhaustion of work. He has come to experience our whole life and dry every tear.

Perhaps nowhere is this more acutely felt than at the funeral of a friend. If they were a fellow Christian, they spoke the love of Christ to us, but their death has not taken Him away. He is right there in the loving hand that another Christian places on our shoulder, the sympathetic tear and the promise that the eternal life which Christ has given was not snuffed out and will be returned to this lifeless clay. On that day, even these tears will be wiped away.

6. The Lamb becomes the Shepherd (Revelation 7:17 That the Spirit of God would comfort the human being weak and helpless before the realities of life.)

This sermon might just want to start with a slow, careful reading of the song of the people in Revelation and the song of the elder in conversation with John. This is exquisite poetry.

The hearer of this sermon will need to identify what the problem is. It is likely that they will feel it but won't be able to articulate it. The world tells us that we need to cope with the problems, we need to find creative solutions, we need to deal with this, and make our peace with the realities of our problems. Much of the time that approach can actually work for us, but then come events like this past Monday. Monday we saw and heard bombs go off and we see the face of that little boy on the Internet whose life was cut short because he went to a race. But of course this is getting to be regular, isn't it? Aurora, Newtown, Columbine, Oklahoma City, and 911 are just a part of a long litany of names that bring up searing images and great pain.

But of course the events of Boston are just as much a symptom as the rest of the garbage in my life, the sickness, the sorrow, the conflict, the finances, the weariness, etc. It is like a stress fracture in our lives. It hurts all the time, but we can get numb to the pain until it comes back and bites us hard. We probably don't even realize the bone is broken, but we feel the pain, but it is not locatable. Yet, these events bring the pain to the surface. Life is terminal, the death rate for being human is appallingly high.

The gospel of this passage is beautiful in that it speaks of a place where God wipes the tears away, the green pastures and the still waters are ours. We will with a loud voice not cry out in fear but in praise. There will be a new normal in our lives. We are so used to the pain, we think it is normal, but it is not.

One day all of the folks who are hearing this sermon will be at rest. They will be part of this throng. They will sing this song with a palm frond in hand and they will rejoice with a holy and beautiful joy. We are partakers of this life, the Spirit of God has united us to them and to this Lamb who sits on the throne. He shepherds us now, guiding, healing, and eventually carrying our broken and dead selves to this scene where raised to new life we sing this song.

The good news also is found in the fact that the one who has gone to the grave ahead of us is bring us all to this place. He shepherds us there. He leads, he guides, he brings us. Jesus guidance in our life is not just sort of aimlessly walking along with us and befriending us in all the sorrow we endure. He actually is bringing us somewhere and we will like that somewhere. He is not just being miserable with us; he is doing something about it, and something John sees in this text.