

4 Easter, year B  
John 10:11-18

Ice Hockey: Boston Bruins, Chicago Blackhawks, Florida Panthers, Phoenix Coyotes, San Jose Sharks

Basketball: Atlanta Hawks, Charlotte Bobcats, Memphis Grizzlies, Milwaukee Bucks, Minnesota Timberwolves, New Orleans Pelicans

Baseball: Arizona Diamondbacks, Baltimore Orioles, Chicago Cubs, Detroit Tigers, Florida Marlins, St. Louis Cardinals

Football: Arizona Cardinals, Atlanta Falcons, Baltimore Ravens, Carolina Panthers, Chicago Bears, Cincinnati Bengals, Denver Broncos, Detroit Lions, Indianapolis Colts, Jacksonville Jaguars, Miami Dolphins, Philadelphia Eagles, Seattle Seahawks, St. Louis Rams

OK, here's a question:

If the Chargers bolt for Carson and America's Finest City is ever able to obtain another National Football League franchise, are you ready for the San Diego Sheep?

Sports teams around the world bear the names of a myriad of different animals, but I couldn't find a team anywhere named the Sheep.

Rams is the closest I could come, but you have to admit, when you hear Rams, it conjures up a very different image from the one you see when you hear sheep.

Down through the ages sheep have gotten a bad wrap as being timid and defenseless and not very bright.

And while it's true that they are timid, and defenseless against predators, they're not stupid.

They are just by nature docile creatures who tend to spend their time minding their own business and grazing on the land.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday.

The combination in the lectionary of Psalm 23 and the gospel reading we just heard from John have created one of the best-known themes in all of the Bible.

We all know about the Good Shepherd, right?

I believe the theme of Jesus as the Good Shepherd has generated more art than any other theme.

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If you Google “Good Shepherd” on the internet thousands of images will appear, and most of those images are highly romanticized or sentimentalized.

They portray what has come to be known as the “Breck” or “Sunday School” Jesus, Jesus with long, wavy brown hair, dressed in a flowing robe, cradling a pure white lamb in his arms and standing in a bucolic setting of green pastures and crystal clear streams.

These kinds of images are all well and good, I suppose, but on this Good Shepherd Sunday it’s time to look more closely at this reading from John, and to talk about shepherds and sheep.

This section of John’s gospel that has inspired so much romanticized, sentimentalized art is not about serenity, peace and pastoral scenery.

It was the product of a bitter confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees.

In the passage just before the one we heard this morning, these are the same people who had picked up rocks to

stone Jesus because they believed he had committed blasphemy by claiming to be the Son of God.

The Pharisees were the authorities who thought they were responsible for the religious instruction and caretaking of the Jewish people.

They saw themselves as the shepherds of the flock, and that's why Jesus used this imagery of shepherds and sheep.

The Pharisees were the religious elite.

They knew their scriptures, and when Jesus used this imagery, they would have known exactly what he was saying.

Listen to part of the 34th Chapter of the Book of Ezekiel:

“The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them — to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the

injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.” Ezekiel 34:1ff.

The prophet goes on in a scathing condemnation of the religious leaders who have betrayed God’s sacred trust, and as Jesus used this imagery of shepherds and sheep, the Pharisees would have known instantly and clearly that he was talking about their failure, their betrayal, their infidelity. And then in sharp contrast to that sad commentary, Jesus tells how he will fulfill his role as the shepherd of the flock. “I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father... I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. We know this, don’t we? We believe this.

This is the wonderful, life-changing reality we celebrate during these 50 days of Easter.

We have been created by a God who loves us so much that he sent his own and only Son to save us.

And that Son loved his Father so much, and loves us so much, that he willingly laid down his life.

This is the Good Shepherd who knows us and calls us each by name.

How can we not listen to his voice?

How can we not follow where he leads the way?

And now that we've focused on the shepherd, let's turn our attention to the sheep.

That's us, right?

You and I are the sheep.

We may not be docile or timid, but when it comes to the evil that prowls the earth like a ravening lion, we are definitely defenseless without a shepherd to guide and protect us.

1 Peter 5:8

The relationship between shepherds and sheep presents itself from the very beginning of the biblical record.

In Genesis, when we read about Abraham, who became the father of the nation, we also read about his great flocks and herds. Genesis 12 ff

In Exodus we read about Moses tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro in Midian; and David was a shepherd boy who was taking care of his sheep in the fields when he was called in and anointed as the next King of Israel.

All through scripture we encounter the theme of the shepherd and his sheep, but do we ever stop to ask ourselves why the shepherds were keeping those sheep? If we start with most of the art that has been inspired by this theme we might come away thinking that those sheep were nothing more than cute, cuddly house-pets; but let's not start there.

Let's start with the fact that the society we read about in the biblical account was a semi-nomadic agrarian society.

When it came to plants and animals, for these people, the key word was utility.

How could they be used?

What could they produce?

So, when it comes to sheep?

Well, when I got dressed this morning I put on a suit that was woven from 100% pure wool.

I would venture a guess that a lot of you are also wearing clothes made of wool or a wool blend.

That's one reason why a shepherd tends sheep.

For part of that sheep's life its wool is a renewable resource that the shepherd can take to the bank.

I say "part of that sheep's life," because in our house and in countless others, it wouldn't be a proper celebration of Easter if we didn't have grilled or roasted lamb on the table.

So, for the shepherd, ca-ching, another reason to stay at a dirty, tedious, boring job.

And of course there is the parchment for the calligrapher and other resources, too.

So when it comes to understanding the real message in today's story of the Good Shepherd, there's good news, and there's challenging news, which I believe is also good news.

The good news is that in Holy Baptism we have been called and claimed and marked as Christ's own.

We have entered into a relationship with the Living God. If we nurture that relationship, and if we are faithful to that relationship, it will see us through any hardship, danger, pain or darkness that will ever come into our lives.

That really is good news.

And the challenging news, which is also good, is this:

You and I have not been called and claimed and marked as Christ's own to be picked up and cradled and cuddled in the arms of Jesus.

We have not been called for privilege or comfort or a life of ease.

It has never been that way for those who are called.

All through the biblical record, down to and including us, the ones who have been called by God have been called for service, and if we want to know what that means, all we have to do is go back to Ezekiel.

Do you remember what the shepherd's of Israel didn't do?

Those are the things we are called to do, to feed the sheep, to strengthen the weak, to to heal the sick, to bind up the injured, to bring back the strayed, to to seek the lost.

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And to that I would add, we are called to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, and to follow where he leads the way.

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