

“You restore our souls O Lord,
and lead us along the pathways
that are good for us.” AMEN!

Good Shepherd Sunday.

That is what today is often called,
but I'd like to tell you a story about
a different kind of shepherd.

The shepherd's name was Sprocket and
he was part of the Skinner family for
about 8 years.

The Rev. Matt Skinner told us how that dog
was the consummate shepherd.

“Sprocket would not eat his food when it
was put in his bowl each evening.

Instead he'd wait, sometimes for hours and
not before the children were in bed, until
he knew he could take his attention off
of everything else for a few minutes
to be alone with his meal.”

It is a rare quality, when every dog
I've owned scarfed its food immediately

upon it being set. :-)

Matt went on to say that,
“there was never any doubt that Sprocket
was with us, for us, protecting us.

Every person who stood up and
moved to a different room,
every squirrel that passed by
the glass door, every creak in
the building - he investigated.

I do not think there is a substitute for
the feeling of security that comes
from knowing you're the object of
someone's constant care and concern.

If Sprocket could not protect
the family from all harm, it wouldn't have been
for a lack of trying.”

I retell this story for the sermon today,
in order for us to get a better feeling
for the calming presence a
good shepherd can bring.

If we know this sense of security,
view this dedication and experience this love
then we know what the distress is like

when the protective shepherd is absent.

When the Good Shepherd is absent
we find that life, people and systems
suffer or fail.

We find people buying guns and
storming capital buildings -
citizens in hand to hand combat
against each other.

When the Good Shepherd is absent
we find a systemic failing of equality
for people with black and brown bodies.

In the absence of the Good Shepherd
wolves and opportunistic “hired hands”
come to attack or take up hurtful
leadership positions that often
further threaten safety and security.

The result is feelings of terror, worry,
abandonment, and violence get embedded
into our very souls. (Pause)

That was why on Tuesday, a little before 5pm,
when the verdict guilty came at the trial
for George Floyd’s murder -

I simply spoke the words “Praise God!”

Praise God because it was the Good Shepherd
who had come into our presence and
taken hold of the system that has
failed people of color for too long.

Praise God that that same Shepherd had been
at work in the police officers who testified
that Chauvin had not followed
proper procedures and proceeded,

without duty to protect and serve,
by keeping his knee on the neck of a
human being in handcuffs for over 9 minutes
causing a man to starve for oxygen.

That same Shepherd had been at work in
the forensic professionals who testified
how George Floyd died of asphyxiation.

And that Good Shepherd was at work in
the brave jury who found courage to proclaim
that justice must be done and
pronounced him guilty on all charges.

What more can one say than, “Praise God!” (Pause)

Each year a section of this

Good Shepherd Chapter is assigned.

But, in order to fully understand what
Jesus was talking about we must
look a little bit back to chapter 9.

Otherwise, it just looks like Jesus decided
to speak about himself out of the blue.

But Jesus did not decide, in a vacuum,
to suddenly take upon the metaphor of
shepherd for himself.

What we read today immediately comes
on the heels of Jesus healing a man born blind.

When Jesus healed him, the man was actually
put on trial for being able to see again.

As absurd as that sounds it was true.

No one believed him.

The temple authorities thought it
was some sort of trick and when

they could not prove the miracle false,
the authorities kicked him out of
the worship community.

But, Jesus returned to the man born blind;
he found him and called him to believe.

And another lost sheep
was found by the shepherd.

That's what the Good Shepherd does. (Pause)

Siblings in Christ, sometimes I feel lost.

Perhaps you know the feeling or even
feel lost today and wonder if the
Good Shepherd will find you? (Pause)

Remember what the Good Shepherd does...
leads us beside still waters that restore our souls,

walks us along right pathways that may
often lead into the darkest of valleys.

That verse reminds us that the sufferings of
the darkest valleys are necessary parts of life.

How else do we come to know joy
without the lesson of suffering?

We go through them and know that
resurrection awaits on the other side.

We go through them knowing that
the Shepherd is right there with us.

In verse 6 we read, “Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me all the days of my life.”

We hear the promise as the psalmist paints
the beautiful picture of the
Good Shepherd in motion.

The Hebrew word “radaph” from where
we get “follow” is better translated with
the word “pursue.”

“Surely, goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me
all the days of my life.”

Like the shepherd in the illustration,
the Good Shepherd pursues us
to protect and watch out for us with
goodness and mercy.

This Good Shepherd, Jesus, goes even further
by laying down his life for the sheep in order
to take his life back up again. (Pause)

Our responsibility then as the Good Sheep is
to reveal and act appropriately to

the needs of the other sheep.

To behave in ways that do not divide,
but instead recognize, embrace and
love the diversity in the Body of Christ.

Jesus makes clear in this section that
there are others who are to be
brought into this fold.

Jesus is in motion and on the move
to bring them into the fold, too. (Pause)

Author Debi Thomas, in her article
“Journey with Jesus,” confessed how
she had moved away from a
version of Christianity.

She can no longer affirm with good faith
the version she grew up in.

A version that taught masculine leadership and
the certitude of knowing God.

It was the kind of fundamental Christianity
that left no room for God’s creativity.

That version of religion which is more
like a rabbit’s foot that insures

personal safety and good fortune.

Debi had come across a quote
from C.S. Lewis that stopped her in her tracks.

It said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe
the sun has risen; not only because
I see it [up in the sky] but because by it -
I see everything else.”

And that my fellow sheep
is our core journey.

Our takeaway from this message.

To know, deep in our souls, that our faith is
not a set of doctrinal claims or sureties,
but a lens through which we look
at the world, ourselves
and each other.

That lens which leads us to
behave in gentler, kinder, and
a more aware behavior.

And know that even when the persecutions comes
we have chosen the Jesus lens to live and
know it was worth it.

You see, we just know it when we hear it.

The Good Shepherd's voice called out
to the blind man and later in John's Gospel
that voice will call out to Lazarus,
who was dead and buried in a tomb.

That voice called them out of their tombs.

We may not be in a literal tomb
but perhaps we find ourselves
in a figurative one?

Jesus calls you out of it,
Jesus calls me out of it, and we come out
to help the Good Shepherd bring others
to the fold.

It's what we do to reflect that
shepherd-like devotion given to those
who know the truth about God's vigilant care
and devotion to humanity.

AMEN!