

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
21 April 2024  
*Good Shepherd Sunday*  
Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:1-18

“Sheepish”

As a city kid, my only experience of sheep was pretty much limited to books and movies. I did, however, live very near a place called Sheep’s Meadow, a large field in the heart of Central Park. Interestingly, that field *was* home to a flock, but that ended in 1934 and the original sheepfold is now a part of the Tavern on the Green restaurant.

This is a far cry from the experience of shepherds and sheep we encounter historically and in today’s scripture – two iconic, beloved pieces that have been foundational to the faith and focus of countless generations – the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm of David and a Gospel metaphor of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

We often see Jesus depicted this way – in paintings, on bookmarks, or Sunday School rooms – with a lamb draped across his shoulders or gently patting one of the flock, with smiling eyes and contented faces all around.

But that is only *one* illustration. The scriptures themselves were written by folks who actually *knew* something about sheep and shepherding, which, turns out, is not all lambskin and coddling.

Take the shepherd’s staff or crook, for example, with its two-part design. The curly end is the rescue hook – useful when a sheep gets into a jam and needs to be pulled out. And the blunt end is for protection – to push away any predators who might threaten the flock. That same end is also used to discipline the *sheep* – training them in the way they should go, directing them, helping to keep them on a good path.

So, a good shepherd offers his staff to both protect *and* train his flock.

But a good shepherd in the ancient world would offer something even more dear: At the end of day, after gathering them in, he would place his own body across the opening of the enclosure, remaining there all night – a human gate between his flock and any predators which might seek harm. He would stay true to his post, at the risk of his own life, faithfully hold his position and his presence through the darkness.

Such is the nature of the shepherd *we* are called to follow – one who offered *his* own life, a Way of wholly unblemished integrity—where love overcomes the predator of hate, generosity overwhelms the predator of greed, and compassion transforms the predator of domination.

But, human sheep that we are, we sometimes stray from that good path or lose our way.

We will need that rescue hook to pull us back when we are tempted by other shepherds in this world — the shepherd of status and greed, the shepherd of misinformation and fear, the shepherd of indifference to human suffering, the shepherd of injustice or self-above-other. We will need the strong staff of his example to keep us on the good path of the divine dream – a world where the old sheep are honored and the young lambs are kept safe from harm. Imagine such a world...

...as others have imagined it. Think of young David -- the boy who would be king – a shepherd and musician, whose lyric of green pastures and still waters assures us of God's presence in all times, places, and circumstances of our lives. When we wander into pastures of loneliness, or grief, that rod and staff will guide and comfort us. When our still waters become troubled or turbulent, that voice will beckon us to safe ground. When we fall into enclosures of depression, anxiety, or anger, that love will place itself across the gate, even across the valley of the shadow of death itself.

Countless generations have learned and leaned on this song of David – the words themselves touch the soul like an anointing oil running over, an endless cup of blessing:

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

Such a dream – the flock of creation gathered as one, guided by a shepherd who remains true even when we are less than true – when we falter, find ourselves led astray, or when we require some poking and prodding to keep to the good path ...

...because that Good Shepherd's name and Way is Love.

*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.  
How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods  
and yet sees a brother or sister in need and refuses help?*

We know what we are called to do. If we claim to be faithful members of the Christian flock, then we know to whom we belong and whose Way we are called to follow. In actual ways and by all our choices – in truth and actions -- personal, communal, global, and political – we are called to follow the Shepherd of Love.

And when we do, when *we* are willing to carry the staff of justice, mercy, and peace in the field in *this* world, then God's love abides in us, and goodness and mercy *shall* follow us all the days of our lives...

...which *is* to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.