

Easter 4B – May 3, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

I John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

I doubt there are very many of us here today who have ever seen a shepherd tending their flock, like back in Jesus' time. This sort of shepherding still happens around the world, but it's not too common in the U.S.

One Christian writer relates the following story about a visit to the Holy Land:

Several years ago, Carolyn and I rode a tour bus through Israel's countryside, spellbound by Ahim, our unusually gifted tour guide. Ahim, who likes to laugh at himself, told how one of his tours fizzled. Ahim said he was reeling off his spiel about shepherds, who don't drive the sheep, they lead them, etc., etc., when he suddenly realized he had totally lost his audience. They were all pointing out the bus window at a man chasing a "herd" of sheep, siccing the dog on them, throwing rocks at them, and whacking them with sticks. "The sheep-driving man in the field," lamented Ahim, "torpedoed my whole fascinating story, metaphor and all." Ahim said at that point he jumped off the bus, accosted the man, and scolded him. "Do you understand what you have just done to me? I was spinning this charming story about the gentle ways of shepherds and here you are hazing and assaulting these sheep! What is going on?"

A bewildered look froze on the face of the poor fellow driving the sheep, then the light dawned and he blurted out, “Man, you've got me all wrong. I'm not a shepherd. I'm a butcher!”¹

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Now I haven't just told you this story just to tell you a funny story... I think this story sets the context for what Jesus says in today's Gospel lesson. Immediately before this chapter we have the story of Jesus restoring the sight of the man who was blind from birth. Remember that one? It was the time when the disciples saw this blind man and asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus then proceeded to teach the disciples, and he healed the man. The Pharisees then investigated this healing, and many of them concluded that Jesus' miracle could not have been from God because Jesus performed work on the Sabbath in order to heal the man.

So it is on the heels of his conflict with the Pharisees that Jesus makes this “Good Shepherd” discourse in chapter 10. Instead of addressing the Pharisees directly, he uses this entire passage as a figure of speech. Jesus very pointedly likening the Pharisees to “hired hands” and “wolves” that are not looking out for the best interests of those who they are supposed to be caring for.

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Jesus' Good Shepherd discourse tells us some very important things about Jesus himself. Many times throughout the Gospel of John Jesus makes the same sort of "I am..." statements: "I am the bread of life,"² "I am the light of the world,"³ "I am the gate for the sheep,"⁴ "I am the true vine,"⁵ and finally, "I am the resurrection and the life."⁶

Today's text has two major parts that tell us something about Jesus, both of them beginning with the same statement: "I am the good shepherd."⁷ The first section I have already spoken about – where Jesus defines himself over against the sort of leadership provided by the Pharisees, which seemed to be more interested in the strict keeping of law rather than in the care of the sheep.

The second section is where Jesus says that he knows his own flock, and they know him – they recognize his voice. This section might be a little more difficult for us to understand, particularly if we haven't witnessed true sheep-herding, so again, another story from that same Christian writer:

Some years back, my friend Roy stood on a ridge in Palestine, overlooking a long, narrow gorge. Below him, the gorge opened out into rolling, grass-covered pasture lands.

A single trail meandered downward through the ravine to branch out into dozens of trails where the gorge met the valley floor. Several shepherds strolled down the gorge trail, chatting with each other, followed by a long, winding river of sheep.

Roy stood amazed at what followed. At the forks of the trail, the shepherds shook hands and separated, each taking a different path into the grasslands. As the shepherds headed their separate ways, the mass of sheep automatically divided into smaller flocks, each stringing down the trail behind its own shepherd.

When the shepherds were distanced from each other by considerable space, each turned to scan the terrain behind him for strays. Then one of the shepherds cupped his hands around his mouth and called in a strange, piercing cry, “Ky-yia-yia-yia-yia.” A couple of stray lambs perked up their ears and bounded toward his voice. Then a second shepherd tilted back his head and called with a distinctly different sound. A few more strays hurried straight toward him. Yet another called his strays with a third distinctive sound. Each stray, hearing a familiar voice, knew exactly which shepherd to follow.

My friend marveled, “None of the wandering sheep seemed to notice any sound but the voice of his own shepherd.” This is what Jesus meant when he said, “My sheep hear my voice” but refuse to “follow the voice of a stranger.”⁸

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We are all those sheep who have heard the voice of the shepherd and chosen to follow. Your being here today is proof of that.

But there are so many other voices that seem to call to us today, voices that call us away from following the shepherd who willingly lays down his life for us. We live in a culture that prizes individuality above all things. So the thought of our being sheep, “going with the herd,” is probably pretty repugnant to a lot of us. It’s thoughts like these that probably keep a lot of people from joining a church. We are like that — wanting to do our own thing. How many of us really have a basic need for the community of Christians we call “our” church? There are plenty of reasons we might not want to be here: past disagreements with other members, old hurts, maybe it’s not always fun, and, if we’re honest with ourselves, we can quite often think of things we’d rather be doing on a Sunday morning.

But we have a lot to learn from the ancient ways of sheep-herding. The purpose of being in a flock is for protection and care. In the flock with the good shepherd is safety, security, plenty of pasture and quiet water to drink. The shepherd of the church feeds us through Holy Communion. He nourishes us with love, his love which can only truly be experienced through others whom he loves, loving us.

Life in the flock that we call the church may not always call forth those wonderful pastoral images that the 23rd Psalm conveys. It may not always be green pastures and still waters. But it is only in this flock that we can consistently hear the Good News of God's love for us, and that we can experience God's grace and forgiveness through the regular use of the sacraments.⁹

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Jesus makes clear in today's Gospel reading that there are sheep who have not yet responded to his voice. He says unambiguously that he must bring them also, so that we can be one flock, under one shepherd. And so in parting today, I would leave you with these final questions: Who is not here with us today? Are there people out there who need to find a safe place to grow in faith? Are these people who haven't followed the voice of the Good Shepherd, or maybe don't even know him? Is there something that we can do to help bring them into the flock?

I thank God in my heart for all of you who have heard and responded to the call of the Good Shepherd. I pray that the same Good Shepherd would help us to guide the wandering sheep into our flock, for their sake and for ours. For we can only be complete when we are one.

Amen.

[1,400 words]

¹ Lynn Anderson, “Fast-Lane Flocks and Cyberworld Shepherds” in *They Smell Like Sheep* at http://www.heartlight.org/feature/feature_971001_sheep5.html, downloaded 5/2/09.

² John 6:35, 6:41, 6:48, 6:51

³ John 8:12, John 9:5

⁴ John 10:7, John 10:9

⁵ John 15:1, John 15:5

⁶ John 11:25

⁷ John 10:11, 14

⁸ Lynn Anderson, “Jesus, The Good Shepherd” in *They Smell Like Sheep* at http://www.heartlight.org/feature/feature_971001_sheep3.html, downloaded 5/2/09.

⁹ This section is indebted to Walter W. Harms, “The Shepherd and the Sheep” downloaded at <http://www.predigten.uni-goettingen.de/archiv-8/060507-5-e.html> on 5/2/09.