

**Sermon Preached by the Reverend Cameron J. Soulis, Associate Rector
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
April 21, 2024**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Oh God our strength and our Redeemer.

There is a lovely little chapel in the Washington National Cathedral that is not often seen by tourists. This is because it is tucked away in a spot visitors don't often walk by. So even if you've been to the Cathedral and know it pretty well, you may not have seen this one. For it is located just inside one of the entrances to the lower level of the Cathedral, and it's small and easy to miss. I think it seats at most ten people. It's a great place for private prayer and contemplation.

Now the prominent feature of this chapel is a stone carving on the wall above the altar. It is a portrayal of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in which he is holding a lamb in his arms and looking tenderly down at it. It is a representation of Christ that is comforting and calming for those who do find this little chapel, as evidenced by the discoloration of the stone where many people have touched the Shepherd's hands.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is a powerful one for Christians. We can see this in the fact that some of the earliest pictures of Jesus show him as a gentle shepherd with a lamb across his shoulders. This remains true even for those of us who now don't run into sheep or shepherds all that often. Depictions of Jesus as the Good Shepherd abound in churches around the world, even here at Calvary where we have a stained glass window of the Good Shepherd in the South Aisle.

Today, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we especially remember this cherished aspect of Jesus, because Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd in the gospel appointed for today. As you might know, this is always true of the fourth Sunday of Easter. It is why today is nicknamed Good Shepherd Sunday.

So what does it mean for us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd?

Now I think we all have some concept of shepherds from books and TV and movies. It might be a kind of quaint and delicate one like Little Bo Peep. But most of us here probably have very little to no real-life experience with shepherding. How many of us actually know someone who keeps sheep or goats?

In contrast, in ancient Israel shepherding was a familiar occupation. For the people who lived at the time that Psalm 23 was written, as well as for the people who lived in Jesus's time, flocks and herds of sheep and goats and the people who cared for them were very common sight. That familiarity must have been a factor in why the shepherd metaphor is found so frequently throughout the Bible. Since shepherding is not as familiar an occupation for us as for those who wrote the scriptures, we can gain a deeper understanding of today's lessons with a little bit of information about what shepherds do.

The foremost concern of a shepherd, especially in ancient Israel, was the condition of the flock. Did the sheep and goats have enough to eat and drink? Were they safe from wild animals and thieves? Did the flock stay together?

Although we might consider the life of a shepherd a rather bucolic one, in reality it required a good deal of work. For one Israel is a semi-arid place So finding enough food and water for the sheep and the goats was not a simple task. The shepherd had to know the geography and had to lead his or her flock to places where there were good plants for eating, fresh water for drinking, and plentiful of both so that the whole flock could be watered and fed. Psalm 23 alludes to this task in the second verse: “He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.”

The shepherd also had to guard the flock. Sheep were easy prey for wild animals. Shepherds constructed enclosures to protect the flock when they could, but they sometimes still had to drive off wild animals. Even if it meant putting their own life at risk. Jesus alludes to this in today’s gospel when he talks about the hired hand running away when he sees the wolf, but the good shepherd laying down his life for his flock.

Guarding the flock also included watching for thieves. Sheep and goats were valuable and the size of one’s flock indicated one’s wealth. Being valuable and somewhat portable, sheep and goats were often a target for thieves. A little earlier in this same chapter of John from which today’s gospel is taken, Jesus compares the good shepherd who enters the gate of the sheepfold with the thief who does not use the gate but climbs in another way.

And finally, the shepherd had to take care to make sure his animals were not overdriven or separated from one another; that they didn’t go into dangerous places or wander off and get lost.

So, knowing this about shepherds and about flocks, this Psalm and this gospel invite us as members of Jesus’s flock to trust in God our shepherd.

We hear this in Psalm 23 where the psalmist expresses an understanding of God as one who provides and cares for God’s people in the same way that a Shepherd provides and cares for his flock. Just as the shepherd makes sure the sheep have enough good green grass and fresh clean water God makes sure that we, God’s people, are not in want. The sheep don’t need to worry about whether there’ll be food or water. The shepherd takes care of that for them. The same is true for us.

The gospel also assures us that we can place our trust in God, although perhaps not quite as directly as does the psalm. The gospel tells us that Jesus as the Good Shepherd, cares for the sheep, knows the sheep, and keeps the sheep safe. Jesus is the one who unlike the hired hand will not run away at the sign of danger. Jesus is the one who lays down his life for his sheep. Just as the sheep rely on the shepherd to care for them guard them and keep them safe, we too can trust that Jesus, and by extension, God, will do the same.

But putting our trust in God, having faith that God will take care of our needs, is hard. I think that’s especially so for us who are Americans, because our culture emphasizes independence and self-responsibility. From an early age we are socialized to work toward being self-sufficient. To not have to rely on others.

So, while it’s a really easy thing for me to *say* that today’s scriptures tell us to have faith in God, that God will care for every need, it is much harder to actually live into that, isn’t it? I don’t have a sure-fire method that will help you with that faith. I wish I did. Instead, I can only attest that I have found it to be true in my own life that God is dependable, that God has always provided for me and sent me the resources I’ve needed. For example, in seminary, the finances coming together just in time for that bill that came due, or my spiritual and other needs. And perhaps you too have had times in your life when you’ve experienced the same.

And yet, despite this firsthand knowledge of God's providence and care for me, there are still times when I find it difficult to place my trust in God. So I've learned that having this trust is always a work in progress. It's something I have to keep working toward. It's something I must choose to do each day. I think the image of Jesus as our good shepherd can be helpful with this. Reflecting on what makes Jesus a good shepherd can assist us as we work toward pushing against our tendency to want to hold tightly to our independence, to work against the culture and cultural forces around us that require self-reliance. That can be helpful as we learn to trust God more and more.

We are the sheep. It is the shepherds work to make sure we find sufficient food and water, to have our needs met, and the lessons today assure us that our shepherd will do that.

We are the sheep. It is the shepherd's task to guard us from danger, and the lessons today assure us that our shepherd will do that.

We are the sheep. We do not need to worry or be anxious. The shepherd knows us and cares for us. The image of the good shepherd can help us remember and put our trust in God's abundant provision and love for us. May it be so.