

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois
April 26, 2015—Easter 4B

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Texts: Psalm 23 & John 10: 1-10

Professors of homiletics (or preaching) often warn their students about the difficulties—even pitfalls—in preaching on texts that are well known to their congregations. And other than the Lord's Prayer, there are few texts better known than the 23rd Psalm. They are not only well known. The words are deeply embedded into our souls. Not just because they had to be memorized in Sunday School or confirmation class. But because they have been repeated, over and over again, in the most significant moments of our lives. At funerals and memorial services, at the side of hospital beds, deep in the times of sorrow and confusion when we face loss, difficult decisions, and the terrors of the long, dark nights. And the words are set to music as congregational hymns—four versions in our own hymnal—as anthems by well known composers like Dvorak, Vaughn Williams, Rutter and others. And there are the pictures. How many of us do not recall a tender picture of Jesus with a sweet, white lamb that hangs in the Sunday School room?

We find refuge in the green pastures, the still waters, the paths of righteousness that overcome the shadows, the enemies, because the Shepherd is beside us, giving us what we need, anointing us, and overwhelming us with abundance—with goodness and mercy. And these words and images spill over into all of the scriptures about God and Jesus as our shepherd.

So, woe to the preacher who on the 4th Sunday of Easter, "Good Shepherd Sunday," messes with this Psalm! Who reminds us that shepherding is a dirty, risky—yes, smelly, job that involves bad weather, predatory wolves and thieves, and rounding up wayward animals. And yet, that is the picture we get in our fragments of the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John each year. John fills in this metaphor for us: this relationship between the shepherd and the sheep where the sheep hear the distinctive voice of their own shepherd. Where the shepherd not only guides and protects the sheep against all danger, but is, in fact, willing to lay down his life for the sheep. No running away from the wolf, leaving the sheep to fend for themselves. The Good Shepherd will die for those sheep.

This is a strong and robust message, isn't it? And in our eight brief verses that we read this morning, there is another—one that we sometimes overlook: Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Last year, year A in our lectionary, we read verses 1-10 that talked about the gate of the sheepfold where the sheep were protected during the night. Often these gate images are used to exclude others. They have served as "proof" that Jesus is *the* only gate, the only Way to God and to salvation. And yet, here Jesus talks of other sheep

and bringing them into the fold—being one. We don't know how. But it's not up to us to decide who's in, who's out.

One of the difficulties with any form of lectionary that determines our Sunday readings is that we get limited selections. There is really no solution for that unless we want to spend several hours together to set the context and do an in-depth Bible study. Today's reading is a case in point: these eight verses do not give us a full picture. For that, we must go back to the previous chapter where we see that this is not a tidy isolated teaching of Jesus. It actually follows upon an incident in his ministry—one that created conflict with those who witnessed it and with the religious authorities who were called upon. The incident was a healing that we read in another part of our year. It was the restoring of sight for a man who was blind from birth. Jesus put a paste of mud on his eyes and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. When it became clear that he was able to see, all Hell broke loose. Nobody seemed to want to believe that the blind beggar was the same man who could now see. They questioned him. They took him before the Pharisees. They questioned his parents. Then, when they questioned the man yet again, and heard his testimony about his healing and about how Jesus must be from God, they drove him out of their midst, out of their community.

But when Jesus learned this, he sought out the formerly blind man. He found this lost sheep outside the fold and brought him inside. And then, he taught the people—the disciples, the onlookers, the Pharisees—in language they knew. Language about a shepherd and sheep. And the lengths to which a shepherd would go for those sheep in contrast to just a hired hand.

Decades later, when this Gospel was being written, John's community could relate to this story in light of their own circumstances. By then, the Temple had been destroyed by the Romans, the whole landscape of faith was forced to adapt. The Jews were seeking different ways of practicing their faith without the centrality of the Temple. Those who followed Jesus, who were also Jews, but Jews who followed Jesus, were no longer welcome in the synagogues. They were like sheep cast out of their fold. The Good Shepherd passages would bring them comfort—the Shepherd had given his life for them. Many who followed him would do the same.

So, what about us? What about the message in our time and place? Some of us, if not exactly driven from our fold or persecuted for our faith in the same way as our ancient forebears—or even people in parts of our world today, some of us have been excluded, abandoned, relationships broken, alone. From families, or friends, even churches. Through illness, loss, alienation, or despair. All of us have those dark times in the valley of the shadow of death. And in those lonely places, we can forget about the constant presence of the Good Shepherd.

A few years ago, I had one of those periods of deep darkness that interrupted my life for several months. Night after night, I tossed and turned and obsessed over both real and

exaggerated dangers that grew bigger and more frightening in those wee, lonely hours. One thing that helped me get through those endless hours was silently singing one tune—over and over and over again, until my mind calmed and I might be able to go back to sleep. It was an arrangement of Psalm 23 that I had sung in a long ago choir. This particular arrangement began to build with the words, “thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” And then, it almost erupted in the wonder of, “thou anointest my head with oil.” To a near shout of joy, “My cup overflowest.” Though my cup felt just about as empty and dry as it could be, there it was—maybe just a single drop of hope. But it was enough. Enough of a promise that the cup of my life might yet brim again. That surely, goodness and mercy would follow.

When morning came, my problems had not miraculously disappeared or solved themselves. It took a long while to regain my equilibrium. But in the meantime, the Good Shepherd had helpers. These were friends who couldn’t fix me, but they could walk beside me, befriend me, and keep me connected to the world instead of rolling over and pulling the covers over my head. And they made all the difference in the world.

The Good Shepherd has helpers here at Grace, too. That has come out loud and clear in our CAT Survey question about experiences that caused people to feel, “Now THAT’s what it means to be the church!” So many mentions of the caring for one another, the welcoming, the opportunities to hear others’ faith stories and to share our own.

What a wonderful gift! A rare gift in the divisive world in which we live. One that we should not keep just among ourselves. There are other sheep out there. Sheep who need care, who are waiting to be found, who seek the cup that we have tasted. Or maybe do not seek it because they don’t even know that it is here. Shouldn’t we find them? Shouldn’t we tell them—or better yet, show them?

Amen.