

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
4th Sunday of Easter/Year B
April 22, 2018
John 10:11-18

"The Lord is my shepherd...."

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

Over the last several weeks we have heard different accounts of the Easter story. Mark, Luke, and John have each given us witness to how the risen Christ appeared to his followers to comfort and reassure them and to open their eyes to what the scriptures had written about him.

On this 4th Sunday of Easter we have an image put before us that most of us we know well. It comes up every year and on every fourth Sunday in Eastertide just as sure as the story of Thomas does on the second Sunday of Easter no matter the lectionary year.

Today's gospel occurs shortly before the Feast of the Passover. We find Jesus in the midst of defending himself against religious leaders who continually questioned his authority. They wanted to know who this Jesus was-this after he healed a man who had been born blind. In response, Jesus pointed to their own blindness for he knew the intent of their hearts. Jesus knew that they cared only for their own well beings and their positions of power. They failed to rejoice for one of their own whom they were supposed to take care of. Those that questioned and criticized Jesus only reminded him of some of the ancient kings of the Old Testament who endangered and exploited their people. They led their people astray and failed to shepherd their people as God had promised to shepherd and care for them and all God's people.

Today Jesus continues his self-revelation describing himself as the Good Shepherd. He would continue to be who God's divine self-promised to be, the One whom Isaiah writes, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom... (Is 40:10)" Jesus would be that shepherd and not just any shepherd but the *Good* Shepherd who loves, cares for, rescues, protects, leads and feeds his flock. He would be the Good Shepherd who would seek out the lost of God's fold. He would not be like the hireling or hired

hand most likely to bolt at the first sign of fear or danger but one willing to risk his life, even die for his sheep.

We often get this wonderful Hallmark image of Jesus standing amongst well-kept grass and wearing his best tunic and cloak, every hair in place and cradling a nice white fluffy lamb. But if we know anything about or read anything about sheep and shepherds, it is quite the opposite. Sheep are known to be dumb and loud. They are known to run off into trouble. They smell and their wool often stained. Sheep can be stubborn but still rely heavily on their shepherd. It doesn't take much in imaging shepherds who always need to know how and where to guide the sheep to food, water, and shelter and still be on the lookout for danger that could come from any direction. A shepherd would probably often find himself stepping in sheep poo or having to chase after or find a stray and fend off predators. After a full day's work they would certainly be sweaty, dusty and dirty too. Not at all ready for a photo op in GQ Magazine. Yet there is a bond made between sheep and shepherd that will not be broken for sheep know who cares for them. The shepherd knew his sheep and the sheep knew their shepherd.

In the fullness of time the Word of God, Jesus, put on flesh and became incarnate. He rolled up his sleeves and got down and dirty. He taught his disciples how to live, how to love, how to care of God's people, how to know God better. He walked through villages and towns and along sea shores proclaiming that God's kingdom had come near. He touched the unclean and embraced the marginalized. He took the dead by the hand and raised them to life. He made mud from spit and dirt and told the blind to go wash and be healed. He didn't back down from threats. Then on Calvary's Hill he laid down his life to the point of death and raised it up again on the third day.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. "I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep." I know you each by name.

The risen Christ continues to be our Good Shepherd. He continues to present himself so that we might be guided, fed, healed and protected, to be in relationship with him. To know God better.

We live in a time as never before when humankind's future seems even more uncertain and the complexities of this world swell more and more each day. There are so many things vying for our attention. There are so many other voices

and things competing for our consideration. Getting us together is sometimes like herding cats.

On this 4th Sunday of Easter we are placed in the arms of the Good Shepherd who says “I am.” I am the Good Shepherd, the One who looks into your weary eyes and promises that you want for nothing. I promise to supply all your needs. I am the Good Shepherd, the One in whom you can rest your mind and restore your soul in the midst of all the distractions that life brings. I am the Good Shepherd, the One who will refresh, comfort, and guide you. And when life is rough, and shadows threaten to overwhelm you, you have nothing to fear. I am the Good Shepherd, the One whose love, goodness and mercy runneth over for YOU.

Jesus our Good Shepherd offers these gifts not only to those who have heard today’s message but to others who are part of Jesus’ flock. For he clearly 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.” Indeed, God and most of the world longs for humanity to be of one accord. There is enough divisiveness. Enough hatred. Still, there is hope. There is love enough.

The author of John’s 1st Letter to the Beloved Community reminds us that “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? (Little children), let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Truth and action.

It is not enough that we simply rest in the arms of the Good Shepherd. We must also be willing to work in this vast pasture. To avail ourselves in seeking members of the great fold. To hear the voices of our sisters and brothers who are in want and in need; who long to know peace and security, refreshment and relief, comfort and mercy in the shadows and valleys of their life experiences.

Andrew King, in his poem entitled, ‘A Prayer to the Shepherd’, captures a prayer for the world.

O Lord our Shepherd,
may your flock not want
in the refugee camps
of Yarmouk, of Darfur, of Dadaab.

May life-giving pastures of nourishment be theirs
in Sudan, in Niger, in Chad.

May waters of peacefulness and healing flow
in Somalia, in Syria, in Ukraine.

And may souls be restored in our own cities and towns
where violence and hunger still live.

O Lord our Shepherd,
death shadows the valleys
and the houses and hills of our lands.

May the strength of your grace and
the assurance of your love
ever with us and ever embracing,
bring comfort to the grieving and alone.

May there be a table of reconciliation prepared
where enemies may sit down in peace

and may the cup of joy overflow for those
whose suffering has been their drink.

Let your goodness and mercy attend your flock,
O Shepherd, our Lord,
and may all your flock dwell
in the unity of your love
as long as life endures.

May it be so! O Lord, our Shepherd, may it be so! Amen!

*‘A Prayer to the Shepherd’, a poem by Andrew King from his weblog, “A Poetic Kind of Place”, 2016