

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 25, 2010 (Easter 4, Year C)

Sheep are dumb. They wander around and get lost. They can't find food and water without help. They're vulnerable to attack. They're stubborn and don't follow directions well. And they head butt things. Sheep are also afraid of running water. They lose their balance easily because of their small hooves and if their fleece gets wet they're apt to tip over and drown. If sheep get stuck in mud or in a bramble they'll bleat endlessly until they collapse and die. God created them but God has done better work.

So when Jesus compares us to sheep, as he does in this morning's gospel reading, it's hard not to feel conflicted. The metaphor would be downright insulting if it weren't so true. Spiritually speaking, we do tend to wander around and get lost; we're vulnerable to attack; and we can be quite stubborn and unable to follow simple directions. "Love God, love neighbor:" it's not rocket science.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is known informally as "Good Shepherd" Sunday. We always read the 23rd Psalm, the gospel focuses on Jesus as the Good Shepherd who watches over and tends to his sheep, and the hymns are full of sheep, shepherds, and pastoral imagery. Ancient Palestine was literally crawling with sheep and shepherds so Jesus wouldn't have had to explain any of these references. His original hearers knew well the important relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. We live in a slightly less rural milieu here in Hingham. You can get a nice leg of lamb down at the Fruit Center but you'd be in no danger whatsoever of running over a sheep while driving down Main Street.

As I mentioned we always read the very familiar 23rd Psalm on Good Shepherd Sunday and it's worth taking a fresh look at it. Many people consider it to be a "funeral psalm" because it's often chosen for such occasions. You could argue that what 1st Corinthians 13 is to weddings, Psalm 23 is to funerals. "Love is patient, love is kind" -- how many times have you heard that read badly by a nervous friend of the bride? "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." How many times have you heard a family member of the deceased read it while struggling to keep from crying? There's a reason that people pick such passages for seminal moments in their lives: they speak to deeper truths that transcend mere words. But the danger with familiar passages linked to specific liturgies is that they become such clichés that their true depth fails to resonate.

And for those who associate Psalm 23 with funerals you might well wonder what it's doing smack in the middle of Easter season. What is a psalm so identified with death and mourning doing in the midst of the church's season of great joy and resurrection? I actually think it's unfortunate that the poetry of Psalm 23 has been relegated to the realm of "funeral psalm." It's appropriate for such an occasion, of course. It speaks powerfully to those in the midst of raw grief – to those walking in the valley of the shadow of death. And the imagery of lying down in green pastures and dwelling in the house of the Lord forever is comforting.

But this psalm is not about sentimentality better suited to a Hallmark card or funeral home literature. At its heart, this is a radical psalm. And it all starts with Jesus; with the Good Shepherd of the sheep. In the King James Version – which for many people is the only acceptable translation of Psalm 23 – it begins “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” Which basically means, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I don’t need anything else.” And it leads to the question: Do you really believe that? Do you truly believe that you need nothing in this world except God? Would your Visa bill agree with this? I know mine might beg to differ.

This passage doesn’t condemn us for having additional items but it begins with a recognition that the Lord will provide the basic necessities of life and that they are all we need. As a shepherd provides for the sheep – green pastures, water, rest, protection, and right pathways – so, too, does Jesus provide for us – food, water, shelter, protection, and relationship with God. That’s all we really need in this life. Unfortunately we are rarely satisfied with the basics; we are rarely satisfied with whatever level of material gain we achieve. And that, my friends, is a spiritual challenge.

Psalm 23 is no doubt comforting but not in the conventional sense. If you look at the verbs you start to see that the life of faith is hard work. Jesus doesn’t expect us to be passive beings – he leads and revives and guides and anoints. He is omnipresent in our lives because we can’t do this alone. Which *is* comforting but a bit daunting as well; because we have a role to play here. Unlike actual sheep we can think for ourselves. So the trick is not to simply be led around blindly but to engage the Good Shepherd and allow him to lead us and guide us and revive us and anoint us. Which means letting go of all else and relying solely upon God. “The Lord is my Shepherd; I don’t need anything else.”

After I mentioned last week on Facebook that I was doing yet another funeral this month, a friend of mine commented that this must be a depressing part of what I do for a living. And I can see how it might seem that way to someone on the outside of the church. But the reality is that I like funerals more than almost anything else I do as a priest. Not because they aren’t difficult; not because they aren’t emotionally draining; not because they aren’t hard on families. But because they are opportunities to be with people at critical crossroads of their lives and because they call for preaching the Good News of the resurrection.

There’s a funny little rubric in the Book of Common Prayer that refers to the burial rite as an “Easter liturgy.” Which at first glance doesn’t make much sense. Because when we bury a parent or a spouse or a friend resurrection is not foremost on our minds. Amid the grief of losing a loved one, unparalleled joy feels distant and our minds are on a tomb that hardly feels empty. But in the Christian tradition, death cannot be separated from resurrection. Death opens the gate of eternal life. So rather than a liturgy of despair, the burial rite is an affirmation of our hope in Jesus Christ. Which is precisely why we can read Psalm 23 – this “funeral psalm” – during this joyful and triumphant Easter season.