

Fourth Sunday of Easter/May 7, 2017

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; John 10:1-16;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"The Good Shepherd"

(The Good Shepherd is dressed in a long robe, with a shawl draped over one shoulder, and a rope belt around his waist. He enters looking for his lost sheep)

Here Wooly! Where are you Wooly? Stop playing games now my little one!

Oh, good morning. **I AM** the Good Shepherd! I am looking for one of my lost sheep. Actually, I am the **image** of the Good Shepherd. You know, the image of the Good Shepherd, as expressed in the **Jewish** and **Christian scriptures**. I am the **image** that speaks of the intimate, loving relationship God has with God's people. An image of provider, protector, comforter, leader and guide, of host and reconciler and home.

As the image of the **Good Shepherd**, I evoke feelings of trust, love, commitment and dedication, steadfastness, faithfulness, loyalty, of deep, abiding friendship.

The Hebrew scriptures portray the Good Shepherd in a number of ways. Of course we know the soothing, comforting image within the **23rd Psalm**. The shepherd cares for the sheep, leads them to green pastures, beside still waters, restoring the wounded, weary sheep.

But there are other shepherd images in the Hebrew scriptures. We recall that **Abel**, the son of Adam and Eve, was a keeper of the sheep (Gen. 4:2) And it was while keeping the sheep of his Father-in-law Jethro, that **Moses** witnessed the burning bush and experienced God as the one whose name is **I AM WHO I AM** (Ex. 3:14) The great **King David** grew up a shepherd and was known as the ideal Shepherd King of Israel (I Sam. 16:6-13).

But perhaps one of the most influential passages for the early church is of **God as the Good Shepherd** spoken of by the prophet **Ezekiel (Read Ezek. 34:1-4, 11-17)**. Here, God chastises the leaders of Israel for not being good shepherds of the people. They have not cared for the people and in fact have used and abused the poor and the weak for their own benefit. Instead of feeding the sheep, they have instead fed upon the sheep! So God condemns those rulers and says that **God will be there shepherd**. God will gather them from being scattered, will lead them to their own land, will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the fountains, will lead them to abundant pastures. God will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak. But the fat and strong, God will destroy! God will feed them with justice!

And that's what Jesus has in mind as he speaks here is John's gospel, to the Pharisees and those who are supposed to be shepherding the people of Israel. Jesus compares them to robbers and thieves who come and steal and harm the sheep. He says they are like strangers who enter the sheepfold, whom the sheep will not follow. For they will only follow the voice of the one they know, their own true shepherd.

And that is true you know? Sheep are not the smartest animals in the world but they do learn to know and trust the one who truly cares for them. They will follow her wherever she leads. And they trust that the shepherd will lead them to good grazing land, to abundant, living water.

And we need a good shepherd. We need a voice that we can know and trust. Remember the Easter story in John, when Mary is weeping outside the tomb and Jesus comes to her, but she doesn't know who he is? Remember, it is when she hears him call her name, "*Mary*" that she then recognizes him!

We need to learn to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls to us, who calls us by name. And we do that by being here in worship, by reading and hearing the scriptures, by being together in community and by caring for one another. By following the way of Christ and seeking the presence of God's Spirit. We learn to know the voice of the Good Shepherd by practicing the love our shepherd God gives to us.

So, when we go astray, as we silly, stubborn sheep tend to do, when we follow false shepherds or strange voices, whether they be people who lead us the wrong ways, addictions that take us to bad places, to bad ways of living, our own inward desires that lead us to devastation and despair, in our times of loneliness and fear, of confusion and trouble, we can know that there is one who is out there looking for us. There is one who will not rest until we are found.

So, finally, **our role** in all of this, is to be **sheep**, right? **Good sheep** who follow the **Good Shepherd** who goes before us all, leading us into green pastures? Well, at the end of John's gospel, the resurrected Jesus says to Peter, 3 times, "*Feed my lambs*", "*Tend my sheep*", "*Feed my sheep*." Like Peter, we too are called to become a community of shepherds, caring for one another, watching out for one another, giving of ourselves for one another, sharing the love of Christ with one another.

We have a **God**, who truly is our **Good Shepherd**, who cares for each and every one of us, who has given of himself completely for us. Who longs to bring us together with all of God's sheep, all people together. Whose voice is calling to us today, calling us to green pastures and still waters, but also calling us to follow in the way of Christ's love, to seek the lost, bind the wounded, strengthen the weak, to take on the image of the Good Shepherd for one another. In his name. Amen.

Now, where is that sheep of mine?! Here Woolly! Here Woolly! Oh, there you are! Now we can celebrate! The lost has been found!