

Shepherd of our soul

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Good Shepherd Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 26, 2015

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us. 1 John 3:16

Perhaps no other imagery is as familiar and more endearing as that of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Yet, few sights are as rare in 21st century American landscape than a shepherd leading his flock. We just don't see them. In the western world, flocks of sheep are normally enclosed in a field while in the Mid- Eastern countries you can see shepherds leading sheep through open pastures across the landscape. Notable figures in the Bible who were shepherds include Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David and Amos. The prophet Ezekiel tells how God cares for the nation of Israel as a shepherd cares for his flock. Shepherds were the first to visit the newborn Christ child at Bethlehem.

The most familiar image of a shepherd is found in the twenty-third psalm in which we are assured that we will be led in the path of righteousness with no fear of evil. Goodness and mercy will follow us and we will dwell forever in God's presence.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows each of us by name and cares for us as a shepherd cares for his flock. While a hired hand might flee at the first sign of trouble, Jesus is willing to lay down his life for us. There are others outside his flock that he intends to bring together into one flock with one shepherd. There are no outcasts. No one is excluded for any reason, including race, culture, gender, sexual orientation or social status.

When I visited the Holy Land I saw that the landscape is the same as described in ancient biblical times. It is very rocky and not arable for farming with only a little vegetation for sheep to graze. I met Bedouin shepherds leading their flocks as they have for centuries. These nomadic peoples live very simply as they have for centuries. Life is not easy for them. They remain with their flock day and night with no time off. At night, they gather their flock into the their tent to keep them safe from predators and thieves. In Western countries, sheep are bred primarily for their meat while in Middle Eastern countries they are valued for their wool and therefore remain with the herd for a longer time. The shepherd calls them each by name and they recognize his voice and only respond to him as he leads them across the countryside.

The imagery of us as sheep is not a flattering one. They are not very bright and because of their docile and submissive nature they are easily led astray. We can be foolish at times with a tendency to act without thinking. We are vulnerable to follow those who make unreal promises only to find ourselves easily taken advantage of and exploited. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way." (Isaiah 53:6) In the magnificent prose of the Book of Common Prayer we confess that, "We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts...we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and have done those things which we ought not to have done..."

As the people of God with the gift of free will, we have to accept responsibility for our own actions and the occasional disastrous choices we make. We can't expect God to rescue us from our wrong decisions. We can't expect to be shielded from our own mistakes. As the people of God with the gift of free will, we have to accept responsibility for our own choices. Whole populations of innocent people are laid waste by tyrannous despots. Economic, political, social and religious zealots take advantage of vulnerable people. Though we may not always realize it, God redeems our wrong choices by walking us through our difficulties to learn from our mistakes.

When it comes to disease and natural disasters, we are left wondering how a loving and caring God can allow such things to happen. It is one thing to accept that people get themselves into trouble, but we can't help but question the injustice of innocent suffering. The truth is that we are subject to the natural order of things and can't blame God for those things that are beyond our control. God does sustain us when we have to face inevitable natural causes. God never abandon us, no matter what.

From childhood, we learn trust from our parents. My father was from the tidewater region of Southern Virginia and loved being out on the water. His whole demeanor would relax when he was aboard a boat. When I was nine years old, we spent the sum-

mer at Lake George in New York. One day my father took my two older brothers and me for a day out on the lake in a small boat. I had a child's fear of water and couldn't swim and was uneasy being so far out in the middle of the lake. As luck would have it, a sudden violent storm came up and we soon found ourselves being tossed about on the windswept lake. As the storm grew more intense, my father headed us back toward the shore as I sat in the bow bobbing up and down holding on with white knuckles. Though we were in danger of being swamped or overturned I remember being unafraid because I had complete trust that if we were overturned he would save me. In retrospect, I wonder how I was so sure of that.

Later that same summer, my brother and I went for a hike along a wooded road and became disoriented and soon realized that we were lost. As we headed down a road we realized that we had passed by the same tree and rock formation more than once. It soon became obvious that we had been traveling in a circular direction. After changing our direction we eventually able to find our way back. In the first instance, I felt sure that I would be rescued. In the second instance we were on our own and had to find our way back from being lost. Learning to trust our selves is as important as learning to trust others.

God redeems our mistakes and helps us to learn and grow from them. Christ as the Shepherd of our souls walks with us through difficult times and informs our conscience when we are tempted to make wrong choices. That Christ was willing to be both shepherd and sacrificial lamb is evidence of our unconditional love. As pastor and shepherd of our souls he shares our burdens and leads us along the right paths.

I can trust someone like that. So can you.