

April 14, 2024
“Jesus: the Good Shepherd”
Text: John 10: 11-18

Prayer: Shepherd God, caring One, open us to your words of life, so we may fully understand the depth and width of your love. Amen.

There is nothing worse than being stuck in a traffic jam caused by an accident or road construction. However, when you're caught in a traffic jam caused by an army of sheep, things seem more entertaining and interesting. That was certainly the case for those of us who traveled to Scotland in 2016. Those of you who are familiar with the roads in rural Scotland, particularly in the Highlands and the Isles, you know very well that most of the roads in those areas are one-way traffic. Because of this, the rule of the thumb, according to our tour guide, is for the smaller vehicles to give way to the larger ones. Being transported in a 36-passenger coach tour bus, we certainly have the upper hand. On our way to Fionnphort to take the ferry to Iona, we encountered a traffic jam caused by a large herd of sheep. At first, I was confused about why the bus stopped on a seemingly deserted road. But very soon I realized that the driver had to let an army of sheep cross the road, so they could do their business of feeding themselves. What an incredible experience!

A question was asked why the fourth Sunday of Easter is always designated as the Good Shepherd Sunday. Possible answers I gathered range from: “well, since our church follows the lectionary, we will always get stuck with the Good Shepherd image” to “why not? It certainly is a good break from listening to resurrection stories which we hear on the first 3 Sundays of Easter!” Very true indeed! Today's gospel lesson is an interruption from the historical recounting of the resurrection events- a shift from the stories of witnesses like Mary Magdalene and Thomas, a deeper understanding of who Jesus is.

As I look back on the after-tomb experiences, how Jesus appeared strangely in locked rooms offering the gift of peace, or on the road to Emmaus having a theological conversation with 2 disciples, or showing up in a room and being fed with a broiled fish, I find myself wondering about Jesus. If I were him, would I really have wanted to go back and hang out with the people who had betrayed, refused and deserted me after I was crucified on a cross? People who, apart from the women followers, left me for dead! I am not sure that reuniting with my

so-called followers or friends would be first on my list. But not for Jesus-Jesus always sought the best for others – one who would lay down his life for the sake of love. So it makes perfect sense after all to reflect on Jesus-the Good Shepherd, to give us a taste of who he really was!

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is an iconic symbol that most of us tend to romanticize even without really understanding what it means. We look at paintings or banners or stained-glass windows, and we think – wow! What a peaceful, serene landscape this is! We have no clue whatsoever of the dangers and the struggles the shepherd and the sheep might have encountered. We have no idea how the life of the shepherd has been interrupted so many times just to make sure his sheep are in a good place – secured and safe – grazing on green pastures and quenching thirst on still, fresh waters. In an age of high caliber technology, e- networking and dystopian movies, the image of Jesus as a Shepherd watching over a bunch of sheep seems irrelevant. If given a choice, it is much easier for us to connect with Jesus, as the carpenter, or Jesus, the Rabbi-Teacher.

Being shepherds, in ancient times, was not easy. They were seen as belonging to the ranks of peasants working for landowners or rich farmers. The job required leading the flock to feed on green pastures, seeking strays before they fall victim to predators, and accounting for the well-being of the whole flock to the owner. The ancient law was such that if a shepherd lost any of the sheep to wolves, thieves, or carelessness, the shepherd was personally responsible for replacing that which was lost. Shepherds were even expected to literally lay down their lives for the sake of their flock. All this makes the gospel reading even more remarkable as a metaphor, as it shows Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as a caring companion on a difficult journey in the life of his flock. The sheep are completely dependent on the shepherd and on the shepherd's sense of responsibility and love. A Good Shepherd won't go home to rest until he knows all the sheep have entered into their rest. A shepherd, who, even when he is dead tired, gets up and continues seeking and calling until the sheep are all home – safe and sound.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd holds for us a deeper meaning of being loving and caring. Like a good parent or a leader, Jesus the Good Shepherd is the one who gives from an unselfish, undemanding, unconditional heart. Jesus the Good Shepherd embraced a selfless life within the practice of community, and he persisted in doing it until his last breath. And at the same time, he didn't gloat over his giving. There was no sense of self-righteousness about his life. He

practiced laying down his life, by speaking truth to power, over and over again, for the sake of others. Jesus taught us to be good shepherds to one another.

Amid this long discourse on shepherd and sheep in John 10, what really grabbed my attention this time is Jesus' assertion that, "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." Have you ever noticed that before? This tells me that Jesus is not done yet. God is not done yet. The Good Shepherd continues to call people from all walks of life, no matter what color, creed or race they come from. This verse gives us comfort, especially when more and more people are worried about friends and family members who no longer go to church, or who don't necessarily identify as Christians anymore, or who have married people of other faiths, or those who claim to be spiritual but not religious. I do think we can say with confidence that God is not done yet, that God works in ways beyond our imagining to bring us together as one flock, and that God's mercy and grace are for all. Jesus, the Good Shepherd is not the exclusive property of Christians! He is not owned by the church. Here is a Jesus whose love embraces all of God's children, a Jesus who must be shared, a Jesus who is embracing, large, and inclusive. This is Jesus without borders. John's community was comforted by this gentle, protective image of Jesus when they felt ostracized and persecuted, turned out and abandoned, by the very people who claimed to be God's faithful servants.

This week I find it challenging to reflect on this Good Shepherd image when the larger community and the world is beset with social-religious-political interruptions, discouraging moments or questionable violence. It is so hard to decipher who in the world we should look up to as Shepherds and what kind of sheep we are becoming? We continue to be confronted with the ongoing wars between Ukraine and Russia, between Hamas and the Israeli military, and recently, Iran; the political battles between the Democrats and Republicans in the US; among the Liberals, the PC's and the NDP's, the unprecedented rise in gas prices, to name a few. Where are the good shepherds in today's world? I'm sure if our leaders were good shepherds, this planet earth would be in a very much better place. On the other side of the coin, there are many good shepherds out there laying down their lives on a day-to-day basis. Many heroes and heroines to thank today; the first responders, the police officers, the firefighters and paramedics, the health providers, the advocates for the marginalized people, religious and political leaders

who are committed to changing the landscapes of faith and politics for the common good, teachers and caregivers, parents and youth leaders. God's message of love continues to inspire good shepherds. God is not done with us yet!

Jesus as a Good Shepherd proclaimed a message of peace. "Lay down your life for another." One writer calls it the overwhelming mission of God for us--to be caring, loving, healing, connecting, working toward making the world a better place to live in. The spirit of unconditional love lives within us. Being a good shepherd who lays down one's life does not turn one into a doormat to be walked over. But it does mean returning to evil with good, anger with peace, violence with nonviolence, hatred with love; striving to give to others not what they deserve, but what they truly need. That is our mandate, and it comes with it the strength and grace of God. If we cannot find these places in ourselves, if we cannot come up with the strength to love our enemies and not hate them, we must try to hold them up to the light and love of God. We can ask God to carry us when it is too much for us alone. This I know for sure – if all the world's shepherds will follow the example of Jesus, then we are certain that all the sheep will be in good hands and this world will indeed be a better place to live in!

What kind of shepherd are you or are you becoming? Are you willing to lay down your life for others? To disrupt your own busyness? To allow yourself the grace of living a life filled with compassion, love, justice? Are you willing to move from your comfort zones for the good of others and the well-being of our world? And most importantly, who are you willing to follow? Jesus, the Good Shepherd invites us all to follow his lead. Will you come and follow him? Amen.