Shepherd Me, Oh God

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:1-7

John 10:11-18

A pastor was given a shepherd’s staff when she began her call at a congregation named Good Shepherd. It was probably meant to be a combination of humorous and serious. After all, a pastor is called to be a shepherd – to guide and encourage and redirect the flock – the congregation. She looked at this shepherd’s staff every once in a while and prayed that she and the congregation were growing to be a healthy flock, gathered to do ministry and to praise God for all that God had done for them. And she prayed that she would have the wisdom and endurance to lead in such a way as to nurture the ministry skills in others so that they formed a true flock for ministry. She saw that shepherd's crook as such a meaningful gift. She prayed that she might be a good shepherd to the people of Good Shepherd.

Could it be that we romanticize the life of a shepherd who is herding the sheep? Did the people of that congregation realize that the shepherd's staff was also used with force to redirect the sheep, if needed? We tend to think of the shepherd wandering through green pastoral settings with a flock of happy sheep passively nibbling away at those tender green shoots. Maybe the shepherd is singing or whistling. And there are always those wildflowers in the paintings. Have you noticed that? The shepherd wanders around in search of the best grass while the sheep obediently follow after him, making those endearing sheep baaaa's. When they are tired, they all lay down in a neat bunch to rest beside a cool stream. When they are thirsty, they all drink its clear waters. Isn't it comforting to envision such a peaceful setting? Restful, pastoral, comfortable, relaxing.

It might be time for a bit of reality, just to ruin the dream. After all, there was a reason that a shepherd carried a shepherd’s crook and that those shepherds were out late at night when they heard the angels sing of Jesus’ birth. That is because once they left the fold with the sheep, they were totally in charge of them, guiding them to where they could find grass and protecting them from any harm that might threaten them. Those threats sometimes came from within, when the sheep didn't stay together or follow the shepherd as they were supposed to do. Sometimes the threat came from without, in the case of severe weather, predators or other unpredictable things. It was the job of the shepherd to watch over them every minute, making sure they had plenty of food and water and keeping them together when they wanted to scatter. The shepherd’s crook was shaped just so that the shepherd could reach out to grab a wandering sheep around the neck and get them back to where they belonged. Sometimes they were used when a sheep fell down a ravine to haul them back up again. They were long enough to keep a wolf out of reach when it had to be used to defend the sheep, but can you imagine just how close that wolf would be in order for the shepherd to use this shepherd’s staff? Maybe it isn't surprising that there would be hired shepherds who ran for their lives!

The first sentence, “I am the good shepherd,” names Jesus. We sometimes call this Sunday 'Good Shepherd Sunday' because of this. If you think about it, the term Good Shepherd really is somewhat of an Oxymoron, because in Jesus’ day, shepherds weren’t really regarded as all that good. They were people of suspect, who wandered around with their sheep, constantly looking for greener pasture and sometimes raiding the homes of people who happened to live along their path. Think about it - when Jesus is called the Bread of Life, he isn’t called the Good Bread of Life. When he is named the vine and we are the branches, he isn’t labeled the Good Vine. And without the label, we are to assume that the bread and vine that he is compared to are just fine or maybe even good. But the shepherd is preceded by the adjective good, making sure that we know just what kind of a shepherd he is being compared to. He is called the Good Shepherd to make sure that the readers don’t confuse him with their automatic prejudices about shepherds, which would be anything but good. Remember the culture in which this was written. We might miss this label today and think that all shepherds were considered good, because we don’t have wandering shepherds as such, but in the time this was written, the general consensus about shepherds was that they were really not all that good.

The very next sentence describes just what it means to be a good shepherd. John writes, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Just think of what this means. The sheep mean so much to the good shepherd that he is willing to risk his very life for their safety and well-being. And not only risk it, he will give that life if the need be. The good shepherd knows that the lives of the sheep mean more than just his livelihood; the livelihood of his entire family depend on the safety of the sheep, and those sheep are valuable to him because of all the time he has spent with them. The shepherd and the sheep have become familiar to each other, and a bond has been formed that is life-giving. The sheep know him, know his voice and follow him. He, in turn, is the protector of those sheep, who trust him. It is a relationship that is mutually beneficial, and the good shepherd is willing to invest his very life for the well-being of those sheep.

But who ever knew sheep to be obedient? A rancher who raised sheep once said that sheep were the only animal he knew of that seemed to do their best to find ways to die from the moment they were born. They seem to love to go where they are not supposed to go. And they don’t stay together very well, either, in spite of being animals that live in flocks. So while the shepherd might be gathering a few sheep back in the fold on one side of his flock, a wolf might be on the other side of the flock taking his choice of fresh meat.

A shepherd’s job would not have been easy. It would seem that loneliness and exasperation far outweighed the occasional moments of satisfaction when he was guiding his sheep. It was worth it only because the sheep were the livelihood for his family.

It is no wonder that Jesus refers to himself as the shepherd and to us as the sheep. Is there any better way to describe us than with words and phrases such as disobedient, wanderers, non-communicative, and easy prey for those who would mislead us? We need that Good Shepherd! And if we don't think we need the guidance of the Good Shepherd, that is when we need it the most.

Jesus is to us as the Good Shepherd is to his sheep. Jesus is in it because he loves us. We are precious to him and we are his. He calls to us and we are his children. He was willing to lay down his life for us. In fact, as post-Easter people, we know that he was not only willing, he did lay down his life for us. He was and continues to be our Good Shepherd.

The good news for today is that Jesus is still with us, taking care of us and watching out for us. Jesus provides us with a Christian community, with the Sacraments and with the Holy Scripture to guide us and to prod us along when we need it. We have pastors and LPAs who preach the good news so that we might be reminded constantly that we are children of God, called by name and brought into right relationship with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. These are his shepherd’s staff. He doesn’t let us go about our lives alone but is there guiding us and urging us along. We respond to this Good Shepherd when we pray, “Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.” (ELW 780)

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. His way of shepherding is different than that of human shepherds. In the end, they want healthy sheep so that they can make a living. It is about more than that for us. Yes, we are like sheep, following God and needing God's guidance. And yet, because of Jesus' suffering and death, we are transformed. With the reconciliation brought about by his death and resurrection, we are filled with the light of Christ. This transforms us so that we might then share that light with the world. We are shepherded beyond our wants and fears into a life of faithfulness.

“I am the good Shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me.” That's the other half, isn't it - the faith response that happens when we know about this God who knows us and loves us. This faith response is the result of the transformation brought about by Jesus' love and sacrifice when he gave his life for us, his sheep. When this transformation happens, we can love our neighbor without controlling them. We can serve those in need without dismissing their gifts. We can work together in ministry, even with people whose political views might be different from ours. This is due to Jesus' transformative love that opens our hearts to reach out in love. It is due to the Shepherding of God.

Maybe we we are called to be more like sheep. After all, they are, by nature, flock animals. Even though they don't always live like they know that and sometimes wander away from the flock, their instinct is to remain in a flock. The seem to know that their safety increases when they are together. Jesus calls us into community, where we learn from each other, support each other, celebrate with each other and where we grow together. If you were to put is in a painting together, wandering around a pasture of green grass, sprinkled with flowers and bordered by a clear flowing stream, doesn't that create a great picture? Maybe we are more like sheep than we care to admit.

Do all the sheep have the same opinion about the shepherd? Do they have different ideas as to where the best grass might be? Do they have sheep best friends and also sheep that would rather not socialize with? Do they think some of the flock are more agreeable than others?

Our call to God to be shepherded is about transformation as individuals and as a Christian community. It is a call to be like sheep. From birth, we can't make it without our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers surrounding us. Does that make us instinctively flock together? We run from danger or try to find safety when it threatens. Do we need someone near us with a theoretical shepherd's staff? We need tending and we respond to the master's voice. Do we need our preachers and teachers? Our sheeply characteristics of needing to be shepherded bring about transformation in our lives and in our community that is only possible through the grace of God.

The good news for today is that Jesus is still with us, taking care of us and watching out for us. Just as the good shepherd doesn't desert the sheep, God is with us in the darkest valleys and in days of sunshine, never leaving us, bringing us with hope to that banquet that has no end. Thanks be to God!