

SERMON: Sunday 21st April 2024
Text: John 10:11-18
Easter 4 ---- Year B

It is interesting, is not,
that even though all of us are far removed from
shepherds and sheep,
we still love the shepherding imagery.

It resonates in us,
touches a something within us.
The continuing popularity of the 23rd Psalm
points to the power of those images and symbols
even in our day.

And given that....
I'm sure we would recognize
that in a rural culture like that
which would have existed in Jesus' day...
the power of the Bible's shepherding images,.....
.....because it is used quite a lot,
would have made even more of an impact,
than for us.

Perhaps for us that distance
both in terms of actual experience
and culture,

means we can maintain this
sentimental attachment.

But speaking for myself,
who has some experience with sheep
and their ways,
being compared to a sheep
is not exactly flattering.

So do we embrace the sheep comparison?
As much as we like the shepherd imagery,
I don't think we accept wholeheartedly
being compared to a sheep!

And yet if we understand Jesus
as the good shepherd,
then if we are honest
we have to accept
that we are, or can be like sheep.

Today's passage from John's Gospel
is one of many passages
that use this shepherd/sheep image,
in the Old and New Testament.

Now as I said,
all of us now most likely
never see or spend quality time with sheep.

Yet today, as in biblical times,
food and other products from sheep
are still one some of the chief food sources
for human survival.

The Bible relates many stories
about sheep and shepherds.
Remember the Exodus stories
that hinges on the story of Passover—
the Hebrews slaughtering a lamb
to give the angel of death
a sign to pass over their houses.

The symbol or picture of a lamb/sheep
is found in many churches,
(although not ours),
to show that Christ is the ultimate fulfilment
of God's plan of redemption.

The psalms include a many references
to sheep and shepherds:
not least Psalm 23,
which we have heard today.

But still, no matter how much
the Bible refers to them,
in all honesty,
and I can attest to this from actual experience,
sheep are smelly, not overly smart, and inactive.
Above all, they are utterly helpless creatures.

When I was still living in Portland
I remember driving past the Abattoir
with my mother,
and seeing a holding pen of hundreds of sheep.
Not an uncommon sight.

There they all stood in the hot sun,
like the proverbial lambs being
led to slaughter,....
....which of course they were.

These sheep were absolutely helpless.
Standing and waiting to die,
with no realization whatsoever
of what was going to happen.

Are people really like this?

And if this was not enough,
in biblical times
being a shepherd
was not high on any self-respecting persons
list of occupations they might like to do
when they grew up.

Being a shepherd put a person
on the bottom of the social ladder.
In fact in Jesus time
many rural poor who did not own land
raised sheep for others, so they could survive.

When you think about it,
this make even more shocking
the story of Jesus birth in Luke's gospel.

The angel announces Jesus' birth
firstly to who....
a group of, if we are honest,
grimy hillside shepherds
outside Bethlehem.

What is even more amazing is that Jesus
would call himself the "good shepherd" (St. John 10:11, 14).

To the listeners in Jesus' day,
this was a contradiction in terms...
shepherds and "good".

Why is it we to some extent object
when we consider the analogy of people to sheep?
Do we resent God—or anybody—
identifying us as smelly, lazy, stupid, and oblivious?
I imagine we do.

I wonder though,
if we were honest
we might admit to resenting
the implications of this comparison
because in some part
it might be true.

Lets look at sheep a bit more.

Sheep separate themselves from a flock,
not because they want to escape,
but simply by keeping their heads down
and grazing from grass clump to grass clump.

They graze for hours at a time
without regard to anything
except the grass beneath them.

Suddenly, looking up,
they realize there are no other sheep around them.

They have literally eaten their way
into a state of “lostness.”

I don’t know if sheep ever panic,
but I suspect they are anxious.

Perhaps we are like this.

Most people,
left to their own devices
don’t want to.....
as is described the Morning Prayer Confession
in the Book of Common Prayer

*“have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep . . .
[following] the devices and desires of our own hearts”*

And yet the thing is we do.

Most of us are neither good nor bad.
We simply forget what is in our real self-interest.

Perhaps we all need what Scripture calls “shepherding.”
It takes a great deal of courage,
and self-knowledge to face the truth of that need.

Conclusion....

And good news is this:
although the scriptural comparison might be unflattering,
we are all in need of a shepherd.

And God provides Jesus for us
—the Good Shepherd.

Jesus comes to us,
as the 23rd Psalm says
as a good shepherd
to bind up our wounds,
protect us,
and lead us to green pastures and still waters.

This Good Shepherd restores our souls.
I don't know about you,
but in the end
I think this is one biblical image
we simply cannot do without.

Lets hear the words of the 23rd Psalm again....

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*