

“Knowing God’s Care”

March 15, 2015

The God We Can Know series – 4th Sunday in Lent

It’s helpful to see the images of modern-day shepherds and their sheep. Especially here in the Gospel of John, when Jesus says “I am the gate” and “I am the Good Shepherd,” seeing the shepherd care for the sheep and actually act as the gate was meaningful for me. The gate offers both freedom and protection. The shepherd protects the sheep and offers security, but he also offers the sheep refreshment and pasture.

And that makes sense when we think about ourselves, doesn’t it? We like both security and excitement. From the beginning, we seek security. Whether it’s a well-worn blanket or toy for a child, a cell phone for a teenager, or a well-padded bank account as we age, we seek security.

Jesus offers a pair of images to reveal his identity to the people. Remember that he’s already offered bread - a promise of sustenance and light - a promise of guidance and help. Now after healing a man born blind and facing more controversy and growing tension with Pharisees, he proclaims his genuine care for God’s people. “I am the gate.” I’ve heard it before as an exclusive statement - more like “no one gets through me,” but it’s actually a promise of protection and abundance for us.

And when Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd,” he means it. He will lay down his life. Maybe you’ve seen the images of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Usually he’s carrying a sheep in his arms or holding the sheep around his neck. The focus is on the care and comfort and protection that he offers. And with the love that we have for the 23rd Psalm, it’s easy for the words about the Good Shepherd to become sentimental – words for a funeral where we look back on Jesus’ love rather than words to live by right now. We have to reclaim the image of the Good Shepherd today.

Shepherd and sheep offered very familiar images for those around Jesus. Hebrew Scriptures were filled with shepherd and sheep images. Moses and David were shepherds who became leaders among the people. In the Book of Ezekiel, God speaks about shepherds – leaders – who only care for themselves and disregard the needs of others. With careless shepherds, the flock scatters and is in danger. So the image of shepherd relates to leadership.

But even more, the region where Jesus was in ministry, in Judea, has rough and stony ground. It was well-suited for a pastoral society—where shepherds would tend sheep. Being a shepherd was not a glorious job. It was humble, hard work. Shepherds usually worked alone and were not high on the social ladder. They put their lives on the

line to protect the sheep, to keep them from wandering off, and to lead them to food and water when it was hard to find.

And we know the prominence of the shepherds in the story of Jesus' birth. They are the first ones to hear the news of Jesus' birth – the birth of the Messiah. They are among the first to worship Jesus and tell the Good News of great joy to others.

We don't tend to see shepherds in the fields, but one of my colleagues told the story of a family member who raises sheep in nearby Morley. What stood out to her was the care and concern that he showed for the sheep, especially in the season when lambs were born. The shepherd sacrificed sleep to stay with the sheep until the mothers delivered and until he knew that the newborn lambs were healthy, and these sheep allowed him to be with them as they delivered the lambs. She mentioned words like tireless devotion and complete trust. She said that the sheep knew his voice.

This shepherd was invested in the lives of the sheep, and that's the power of Jesus' image. The sheep trust the shepherd because he can be trusted. He is with them. He is concerned for the good of the flock. He has authority in their lives because of he invests himself in their lives.

Jesus invites us to find security in him, and he also tells us that we don't earn it. It's not something we buy or gain by doing everything right. It is a gift of God. Jesus is invested in us. He cares about us. He wants us to know it and live like we know it and celebrate it every day.

The shepherd is different than the hired hand. It is not just a job to care for the sheep, but he's willing to lay down his life for them. It's not a profession, but a connection and relationship. He knows the names of the sheep, and they know him. For shepherds in Judea, the sheep were their livelihood. The sheep were raised for wool, so they stayed with the same shepherd for many years. They were named and claimed by the shepherd. He cares about them and seeks them out if they wander off.

When the shepherd led the flock to a new place, he went in front to make sure it was safe, and the sheep followed when he had secured the path. A shepherd was constantly at work. It was never a passive job. He had to pay attention to what was happening. He had to have courage in times when the sheep might be threatened. Most of all, he had to have patience and love for the sheep. He fed them, gathered them, carried them, and led them. The shepherd considered the well-being of the sheep he cared for.

And the words from the 23rd Psalm give us insight. "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Those tools of the shepherd were important. They offered protection and correction for the sheep. The rod helped the shepherd to ward off predators like wolves who would be a serious threat to the flock or others. The staff assisted the

shepherd on the rocky ground, but it also allowed him to bring back wandering sheep if they strayed from the protection of the flock. The rod and staff remind the sheep that the shepherd is there.

So for all of the cozy images of the Good Shepherd, we have the reality of God's protection and correction. When Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, it is a call to follow him. Certainly we stray away. We get off course. We wander from the safety of community. And we need protection from the power of temptation that can destroy our relationships. We need correction – we need to be brought back when we wander.

Marion Henderson tells the story of riding in a tour bus from Jerusalem to Jericho. She was sitting in the front seat since she was leading a group, and about half asleep, having made the same trip many, many times.

Suddenly, the bus lurched to a stop, waking her up.

There in the middle of the street was a shepherd. Now, with a 48-passenger bus running straight at him, most people wouldn't be out there, but there he was. And the sheep started to cross the road. Not all at once, but in twos and threes and ones. But the shepherd never shooed them, or hurried them, he just stood his ground until the last sheep was safely off the road. Then he followed them, and threaded his way through the flock until he was back up front again, leading the way.

Jesus doesn't say, "I am the shepherd." He says, "I am the Good Shepherd." For those who heard him, perhaps memories of other shepherds who were not good came to mind – a memory of God's Word to the prophet Ezekiel. But Jesus can be trusted – in green pastures, by still waters, and even in the valley of the shadow of death. His authority is from God, and he shows it in his love for all the world – his investment of his life for all.

Sheep follow a shepherd with confidence that they will be cared for no matter what. Dwelling in the house of the Lord forever is not about making a reservation for later on, but rather living with an assurance of God's presence right now. It means trusting in God's providence – that we walk in goodness and mercy every day – even when it may not feel like it.

We can trust Jesus because he is the Good Shepherd, not the hired hand. He loves us enough to go to the end for us – to give his life to save us. He seeks to protect us and help us when we face danger. He comes to offer life, but even when his offer is rejected, he lays down his life for the sheep.

If Jesus is the shepherd, then we are the sheep. We are called to follow him. We listen, believe, trust, and follow. We do what he asks us to do. Jesus calls us to follow him to the point of seeing the needs around us – the needs of our neighbor - the one who is in need – as near as next door and as far as half a world away. "We are to be to

others what Christ has become for us.” Just as he makes room for us and gathers us in, we make room and welcome others with hospitality. We offer shelter and hope right now.

We have to move past the tranquility of the 23rd Psalm and consider how we lead with humility and hard work – how we serve and how we care. We have to hear that question from the video: Have you entered the gate? How do you respond when someone asks you about God? How does God care for you? How does God’s care motivate you to care for others?

Will we let his love, care, and compassion flow through you and into a world where people hunger for that kind of authentic, real, and healing relationship that he provides? Will we follow Jesus the Good Shepherd by taking risks to care for others, sacrificing for others, standing up for those who are ignored and overlooked? We are motivated by love because of what Jesus does for us. We are shaped by God’s grace. And God’s care is made real through the Body of Christ.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.