

Today, the 4th Sunday of Easter, is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year on this Sunday, we read approximately one third of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, the chapter in which Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd.

It's a comforting image: Jesus is the Good Shepherd. We are his sheep. It's an intimate image: Shepherd and sheep spend time together. The sheep know their shepherd, the shepherd knows his sheep. It's a familiar biblical image. Psalm 23 proclaims, "The Lord is my Shepherd." Psalm 100 says, "We are God's people and the sheep of his pasture."

These images of God and Jesus as our Shepherd are warm and fuzzy. Or should I say soft and woolly? These intimate, comforting images of God's love for us are some of the most wonderful images that we can contemplate and comprehend.

But in our Epistle lesson this morning, we get a slightly different spin on the Shepherd image. It comes from the 7th chapter of the Book of Revelation. Remember, the book of Revelation deals with very rich symbolic images. And sometimes the images are paradoxical. That's the case in Revelation in the last verse of our Epistle lesson today: "The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd." What a strange image. The Lamb will be their shepherd.

Actually, this is the fourth strange image of the Lamb. This is the fourth paradox involving the Lamb. Actually, all four paradoxes are important to us, and I want to reflect on them this morning.

For the first two paradoxes, we need to turn back a couple of chapters to Revelation chapter 5. We read a portion of that chapter last week. In chapter 5, we see two of the four paradoxes about the Lamb.

First, we are told of a scroll with 7 seals that no one is able to open. Remember, everything in Revelation is very symbolic. The scroll is God's scroll. The 7 seals are a legal image. They indicate that the scroll is something akin to God's will, as in last will and testament. The scroll reveals God's plan for the world. And no one is worthy to open it. No angel, no human can reveal God's plan.

But, all of a sudden, Revelation says that there is one who can open the scroll. The Lion of the tribe of Judah. The Lion of Judah is an ancient Jewish symbol of the Messiah, the conquering King. And just to make sure that we're talking about the Messiah, a second image is used. This Lion of Judah is also a descendent of King David. David is at the root of his family tree. This powerful Messiah, David's descendent, the mighty Lion of God can break the seals and reveal God's will.

But then as we turn our attention to look toward the Lion, we get the first paradox. There's a switcheroo. We expect to see a Lion, capital L. But in place of the Lion of Judah we see the Lamb, capital L.

The meaning is clear. The Messiah is the only one who can reveal God's will. But he won't do it like a Lion. He will not use his power. He will not conquer with muscle and tooth and claw. He will conquer as a Lamb. Lambs are rather weak and defenseless. And Lambs are often sacrificed. And this is the way that the Messiah, that Jesus Christ, will reveal God's will. That's the meaning of this vision. Paradox #1: the Lion will act like the Lamb.

The second paradox follows right on the heels of the first. The Lamb is standing as if it had been slaughtered. Now what's that all about? Slaughtered lambs were not that unusual. Lambs were commonly sacrificed in ancient times. But everyone knew that a slaughtered lamb was a dead lamb. This Lamb in Revelation has been slaughtered. But it's also standing. It's alive. In fact, if you look over at St. Paul's Easter banner, you see that image. A slaughtered lamb who is standing. The message is the message of Jesus' Resurrection. The Lamb was killed. The marks of its death are still visible. And yet, it is alive. That's Paradox #2: the slaughtered Lamb stands.

And because of those first 2 paradoxes, the Messiah is worthy of praise. The Messiah gave up his Lion powers and allowed himself to be slaughtered like a Lamb. But the slaughtered Lamb is still alive. The Messiah has overcome the power of death. And that's why the citizens of heaven sing the new song to the Lamb. We heard that song in our Epistle lesson last week:

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

But in a way, these first two paradoxes are part of the great “so what” of Easter. Jesus died. Jesus rose. So what? What does that mean to you? What does that mean to me?

The answer is, “Everything.” And that answer is found in our Epistle lesson for today, Revelation ch7 (bulletins). There are some intervening visions since ch5. But then in ch7 v9, John says:

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”

The white robes are symbolic of new and eternal life. The palm branches are signs of victory.

Which brings us to the third paradox in v14. How are these countless people saved? By coming through the great ordeal, by coming through death itself. They are saved by sharing in the death of the Lamb. They have washed their robes. Their white robes of eternal life are made white by being washed in the blood of the Lamb. That's Paradox #3: the Lamb's death brings salvation; the Lamb's blood brings life.

Which brings us to the last paradox. That new life that the Lamb brings is perfect. v16: no more hunger; no more thirst; no more scorching sun and heat. In other words, their needs will be satisfied. No disaster can befall them. Why? v17: The Lamb will be their Shepherd. Paradox #4. Our shepherd is a lamb. Our Shepherd is THE Lamb.

The one who made himself vulnerable will protect us. Not from suffering and death in this life. But from suffering and death in the life to come. No more hunger. No more thirst. No more disaster. No more tears.

For us, that is tremendous news.

Because we live in a culture that denies death. We worship youth and beauty. We avoid the sick and the elderly. Because, as a culture, we don't want to face our mortality.

At our funerals, we cover our corpses with cosmetics. We put green astro-turf around the grave and hide the dirt of that came out of it behind a curtain or under a tarp. Why? So we won't have to deal with the reality of death.

But our Shepherd offers us a different way. He didn't deny death. He embraced it. And yet, he is still standing. And for those who trust in him, those who share in his death, those who come through their own deaths, for them, he brings eternal life. Their robes are washed white in his blood.

This shows us how great God's love is for us. God loves us enough to want to spend eternity with us. He sent his Son, the Lamb of God, our Good Shepherd.

As Jesus said in our Gospel lesson, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

Following Jesus Christ does not exempt us from suffering and death. But it does insure that we will never be snatched out of his loving grasp. Even after death, we will still be in his hands. And we will be able to stand.

We will be able to stand around his throne.
We will be able to sing his praise.
He will hold us in his hand.
And he will never let us go.

And so, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.