

Today, the 4th Sunday of Easter, is always Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year on this Sunday, we reflect on the image of Jesus as Good Shepherd. Of course, in our part of the world beef is raised and mutton is hard to come by. But the image of Jesus as our Shepherd is still of huge spiritual importance, just as it was centuries ago.

The image of Jesus as Good Shepherd captured the imagination and the art of the early Church. The earliest images of Jesus in the art of the Christian Church were not Crucifixes. The image of Jesus on the Cross would not become popular for nearly 1,000 years. Perhaps that's because early Christians knew all too well the brutality of Crucifixion. Likewise, the earliest images are not of Christ sitting on a throne in glory, though these depictions would become popular a few hundred years later.

Instead, the early Church's favorite depiction of Jesus was as Shepherd. During the first few centuries of the Christian history, the Church was largely an underground movement. Sometimes it was figuratively underground, meeting in secret for fear of persecution. Sometimes it was literally underground. At times, the Church in Rome met in the catacombs, the large underground cemeteries in that city. And amidst the darkness of persecution, the Church drew and painted images of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. In the midst of danger, the early Christians drew strength from the image of Jesus as their Shepherd. No matter how bad things got, they knew they had someone on their side to care for them.

The image of shepherd is a powerful image. In our Gospel lesson from the 10th chapter of John, Jesus tells us "I am the Good Shepherd..." (More literally) "I am the Perfect Shepherd. And I lay down my life for the sheep." In the image of Good Shepherd is a picture of Jesus' act of sacrifice. This Easter season we celebrate our Shepherd who gave his life for us, and who in turn gives us life.

By contrast, Jesus talks about bad shepherds. Bad shepherds will not risk their lives, let alone give their lives for their sheep. Bad shepherds don't have the welfare of the sheep at heart. Bad shepherds are looking for mutton, not wool. Bad shepherds run away at the first sign of danger. Bad shepherds are interested only in themselves.

The prophet Ezekiel famously had much to say about bad shepherds. In Ezek 34, God says to the bad leaders of Israel, "You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them."¹

In other words, you've failed in your job as shepherds.

And so, since the bad shepherds are not caring for their sheep, God promises to step in, to be their Shepherd. And as Jesus says, he is the one who cares for his sheep; he is the Good Shepherd.

¹ Ezek 34:3-4

Unlike us, as Suburban 21st century Americans, the early Christians knew what good shepherding was all about. They knew that real shepherding was a total commitment. It was a 24/7 job. The shepherd lived with the sheep. Because of that, it was not a very glamorous job, spending all day and all night out in the country with a bunch of sheep. But it was an intimate job. Shepherd and sheep lived their lives together.

And because of that intimacy, the shepherd knew his sheep and was known by them. Even today, Middle Eastern shepherds will often keep their sheep together in a single pen, and yet the sheep will come to their own shepherd when he calls them. They know who their shepherd is. And their shepherd knows who they are. A few verses earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus said, "I know my own, and my own know me."

There is a real relationship between sheep and shepherd. The shepherd knows the sheep and calls them by name. The sheep know the shepherd and they listen to his voice. And because they know him, they will follow him. Just as a parent knows a child and a child knows the parent, so the shepherd and sheep know each other.

But in addition to knowing the sheep, there is one other important aspect to being a shepherd. Shepherds care for their sheep.

In the 40th chapter of Isaiah which we read back in Advent, we heard of that kind of love and care. Isaiah says, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom."²

What a wonderful image that is. Lambs gathered and cradled close to the chest. God caring for us and cradling us.

The first time I held Jimmy in my arms, 23 years ago, at 5:30 a.m. on a February morning, I had a wonderful glimpse into the kind of love God has for us. And that experience repeated itself two years later at 2:20 a.m. on a May morning when I held Lisa for the first time.

Many of you have known the joy of holding your own child in your arms. Yet, what many people have difficulty with is understanding that God feels the same way about you. God longs to hold us and cradle you in his arms. God wants to carry you close to his bosom.

We may think that we outgrow the need for parental love, but in truth we never do. We are called to come to God as little children, with the same openness and trust that we once had for our parents when we were helpless infants.

Often it is helpful for me during prayer to imagine myself being cradled in the enormous arms of God's embrace. It helps me keep my perspective of my place in the scheme of things. I may think that I'm pretty independent and in control of things. But God knows me better. God knows that there is much of me that is nothing more than a little child who needs to be held in loving arms.

² Is 40:11

Our Shepherd will carry us. It doesn't matter if we're nine or ninety. In the 46th chapter of Isaiah, God says as much: "Listen to me, O house of Jacob... whom I have carried since the womb, whom I have supported since your birth. Even in your old age I shall be the same. Even when your hair is gray I will carry you. I have made you and I shall uphold you. I myself shall carry and shall save you."³

Whether we're fresh out of the womb, or whether we're old and gray, God promises to carry us. God promises to bear us in love as a father or mother would carry their child.

Sometimes, we may think of God in angry or vengeful terms. We might think of God as policeman or judge, as the one who punishes. We expect less of God than we would of our own parents. We think that God will treat us worse than we would treat our own children. This is a sad twisting of the Gospel.

That doesn't mean we can do whatever we want. And that doesn't mean that our actions won't have consequences. Sometimes parents have to discipline their children. The same applies to God. But at heart, God's primary motivation is love.

There's an urban legend out there. It's been floating around for almost 60 years. You may have heard it. Part of it is problematic. But part of it is helpful.

As the story goes, in Biblical times, if a sheep was particularly stubborn, if it wouldn't listen to the shepherd, then the shepherd took an extreme course of action. The shepherd would break one of the sheep's legs. Then he would bind it up. And then he would carry the sheep on his shoulders until the leg healed. This would be supposedly a bonding experience for the sheep, and the sheep would never wander again.

On the surface, this seems like a nice little story about tough love. Unfortunately, it has no basis in fact. And as I said, part of it is problematic, but part of it is helpful.

The problematic part is seeing God as someone who intentionally inflicts injury. Who among you would break your child's leg intentionally to make them grow closer to you? We would label that as abusive, not loving. That's something a bad shepherd would do.

But life does batter and knock us around. And God is there to carry us through the rough times. God does not intentionally injure us. Yet God is there to carry us through the times when we are injured. And these rough times can often be times of tremendous spiritual growth.

So often in my life, the times I draw closest to God, the times that my relationship with God has been strengthened, are those time when I'm in pain and when God carries me along. He is the Good Shepherd. "He will gather the lambs in his arms." "I shall carry you," says the Lord.

At heart, God loves us as much and much more than any mother or father loves their child. God's love is far greater and far more perfect than any love we could give to or receive

³ Is 46:3-4

from each other. Jesus is our Perfect Shepherd, the one who knows us and loves us and carries us.

In the midst of all the voices in the world, listen for his voice. He knows you, and he loves you. There are many competing voices in our noisy world. There are voices of bad shepherd who don't care for you at all. There are voices of those who only have their own interests at heart. There are voices from those who are looking for mutton, not wool.

But in the midst of all that noise, don't miss the calm quiet voice, the voice of one who loves you, the voice of one who laid down his life for you.

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. "I know my own and my own know me... And I lay down my life for my sheep."