

Sermon 9-

Lessons: Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24

Gospel: John 10:11-18

+ God revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for their Name's sake.

*Please take a seat.*

Good Morning-

Today, we observe Good Shepherd Sunday, which falls on the fourth Sunday of Easter each year. Today's readings allude to this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. One of the oldest images of Jesus is of him as the Good Shepherd; one of them comes from the 3rd Century. But what does that mean, and how do we make sense of it in our modern experience? Many of us are much removed from animal husbandry and herding, and passages like the ones we hear today often wash over us. Or, we domesticate them and make Jesus out to be some demure shepherd caring for his wayward sheep, seemingly unconcerned about our daily realities. What if we looked below the surface and discerned what Jesus meant when he called himself the Good Shepherd? Blogger Debbie Thomas states, "As the Good Shepherd, Jesus loves the obstinate and the lost. He lives at the edges of polite society, out in the wild, untamed places of the world. His life remains perpetually in danger." Jesus is always walking along the margins and against the grain of 'acceptable' society and religiosity.

I shared in the leaflet this morning a cartoon by David Hayward, or as he's known through his cartoons, the "Naked Pastor," his name implies the focus of his work- "to tell the naked truth no matter how vulnerable it feels." As the flock, we too must often confront uncomfortable truths; we often set rigorous expectations and parameters to be "accepted" in sacred spaces. If we recall, Jesus found this sort of exclusionary approach to faith heretical. He was constantly chastising the religious leaders of his day about their short-sightedness and lack of imagination about what faith and community should look like. This is what would set Jesus against his contemporaries and what would ultimately lead to him being executed by the Empire. He dared to call out to the lost sheep of his day and told them to come to

the banquet of the Lord just as they were and wherever they were. This is the provocative message in the Gospel.

What institutional guardrails prevent our community and church from accepting people fully, just as they are? Do we expect people to change to fit in, or do we grow and change together and discover those unique characteristics that each make us beautiful and good in God's sight? Do we grow in compassion together? To listen to the shepherd's voice, we must first turn away from the 'wolves' of this world: greed, avarice, and hateful rhetoric. Discover that love, compassion, and an expansive view of the kin-dom are the most honest and authentic ways to follow Jesus. Truthfully speaking, it is dishonest to the narrative to domesticate and clean up the story to make us feel comfortable.

I do not have much experience being on the farm, but I have visited a petting zoo or two, and sheep stink. Barnyards are messy, noisy places. There is not the serenity that we often imagine should be there. Jesus knew this reality, too; that is where he said we would find God's kin-dom among the world's muck and grime. However, even in the muck and dirt, a sense of beauty and lovingness gives us a glimpse of the truth about this path. We see great trust and humility in those animals that are cared for by their caretakers. We can see ourselves taken care of when we remember the call 'to care for the least of these.' Remember to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, tend the sick, welcome the stranger, etc. The Kin-dom of God is one of compassionate and loving embrace. God meets us where we are and calls us into the larger sheepfold of Their community. The Psalm for today, used so often at funerals, is a beautiful metaphor to ponder when considering the journey with our Creator.

However, Debbie Thomas cautions against the domestication of these metaphors and these stories, saying, "No wonder the church has turned Jesus-the-Shepherd into a greeting card. It's hard to face the bold, patient, and tenacious leader he really is. It hurts to trade the Hallmark card for the long nights and danger-filled days of a vocation in the muck." Accepting the path of Jesus is tough, and it is

far too easy to flee like hired hands when trouble arises or when we have reached the limits of our compassion. And, yet, the shepherd still calls each of us by name and calls us back to our center and the embrace of God.

In my seminar course, a requirement for an internship at Iliff, we have considered what a ‘prophetic leader’ should be like as interns enter their respective careers. One critical characteristic of a prophetic leader is empowering and creating inclusive communities that celebrate differences, strive for justice, and seek peace within our community and beyond—work we are all called to do no matter where we are located. This is the type of leadership Jesus emulated for his disciples and the type of leadership we are reminded of today in our readings. It is a leadership that seeks the lost and forgotten. A leadership that does not turn away from the dark and desolate place of this broken world. In our insular nature, which is a survival technique, we often forget that our walls will not protect us from the dangers of this world. Jesus did not come to comfort the comfortable. He came to make them uncomfortable, to shake them out of their complacency. The Good Shepherd still makes us uneasy about our privilege and pushes us to open our doors to the world. To trust, even when ‘wolves’ prowl, there is still protection from the one who is Love. The one who stands in solidarity with humanity and is invested in the flock. Not a ‘hired hand’ that might flee at the first sign of trouble. The Good Shepherd has ‘authority’ to lay down his life and take up again; this is a true investment in their flock. To love so much, you must be willing to give up everything to ensure others thrive. We can make the same choice.

Now, a caution: this is not a call to assimilation. No, when we invite someone into our community. Whether friend or foe, we must be open to learning from each other. Another characteristic of prophetic leadership is a position of continuous learning and adaptability. As the image demonstrates, this is not about removing one’s ‘skin’ to mold into the community. This is about each of us considering what ‘skin’ we may need to shed to be more fully embodied and authentic to our belovedness.

Do we need to let go of presuppositions or implicit biases of the other? Do we need to shape our learning to be curious rather than sure?

As the Good Shepherd calls out, we sometimes engage in selective listening. Are we aware we may need to listen closer—to pay better attention to the voice of Love? As our Epistle today reminds us, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” The shepherd journeys with their flock into the hills to find grazing pasture. In the same way, Jesus calls us to go to seek the lost and forgotten. Not to make them into our image but to co-create authentic, loving communities. St. Andrew’s is in a place of decision with the search for a new Rector—a time of great uncertainty and tension. Trusting the search committee and others to lead this community into the next phase of Parish life is part of this process as we reflect on Good Shepherd Sunday, who in our community is leading with truth and action to lead this community into a new place—a place of abundance, love, and wholeness.

These are fraught times, and it is naive to think otherwise for so many reasons. With the escalation of war in the Middle East, divisions at home, and the danger of climate change, it can be easy to forget the core of our being—the core, which is love. The shepherd leads and guides his sheep through the dark woods to find water and nourishment. This community has nourished me as I discerned my call to leadership. As your Parish Administrator and intern, I have learned much that will assist me in hearing my call. I want to lead with truth and action wherever I may end up during my vocational journey. This is our assurance today: the shepherd is always there to guide and lead. We do not simply follow with blind faith but a clear awareness of our belovedness and the reality that we are whole just as we are. Do not misunderstand; sin and evil are actual realities, but that is not the whole of the story. Those things are the ‘wolves’ that make us shaky in our journey on this earth. This is the Easter message, to be assured of God's presence and the love of creation that surrounds us throughout our lives is where we discover the Good News message of the Gospel. As the psalm reminds us, “Surely your

goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." So, St. Andrew's, how will you answer the call of the Good Shepherd?

