

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

April 30, 2023 – 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*We Are His Sheep—and His Shepherds*”

First Lesson	Acts 2:42-47	(The Apostles devoted themselves to prayer & the breaking of bread)
Psalter	Psalms 23	(The Lord is our Shepherd)
Second Lesson	1 Peter 2:19-25	(We were going astray like sheep, but by Christ's wounds we are healed)
Gospel	St. John 10:1-10	(Jesus tells the parable of the Good Shepherd—whom He is)

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George Adam Smith, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century biblical scholar, wrote of traveling in the Holy Land and coming across a shepherd and his sheep. He fell into conversation with him and the man showed him the fold into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls, with one way in. Smith asked him, “Is this where they go at night?” “Yes,” said the shepherd, “and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe.”

“But there is no door,” said Smith. “I am the door,” said the shepherd. He was not a Christian man and wasn't speaking in the language of the New Testament. He was speaking from an Arab shepherd's viewpoint. Smith, knowing that Jesus said, “I am the gate for the sheep,” looked at him and asked, “What do you mean you are the door?” “When the light has gone,” said the shepherd, “and all the sheep are inside, I lie across that open space, and no sheep ever goes out but over my body, and no predator comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was borrowing from this centuries' old Middle-Eastern custom of a shepherd protecting his sheep to assure His followers—and us—that He is our caregiver and our protector against harm and evil. Yet, even under the nurture of a good shepherd, there are times when the sheep get lost or injured, just as we do. So our Good Shepherd, Jesus, isn't promising us a trouble-free existence, only that He will always be there to care for us, to seek us out when we go astray, and to bind up our wounds when we are hurting.

In Greek, there are two words for “good.” The first is *ä-gä-thos*, meaning morally upright. The second is *kä-los*, which not only encompasses the laudable attributes of *ä-gä-thos*, but also adds the qualities of being genuine, beautiful, magnificent, and praiseworthy. And that's the term Jesus uses in today's text to convey a goodness far beyond merely doing the work of a shepherd. It is a type of goodness that should make us feel secure and at peace. It is a goodness permeated with a love, a love so deep that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, would lay down His life for His sheep.

Jesus was not a hired hand seeking just to get paid in order to complete a job, and if a dangerous situation arose, he would be out of there. As the *kä-los* Shepherd, He cares deeply for His flock, and will never abandon His sheep.<sup>2</sup> In John 10:28, Jesus promises, “No one can snatch them out of My hand.”

When Jesus contrasts Himself with the hirelings, He's referring to the religious leaders of His day, who were more concerned with their own importance and how they were seen by society, rather than teaching and doing the will of God. They were arrogant and looked down on the people. Sadly, there are leaders in the Christian Church today whose concern is not the welfare of the sheep, but rather for their own promotion and self-image. They seem not to be listening to their Shepherd.

How many of you have a dog? I don't have one now, but I had a dog when I was in junior high school. His name was Charlie and he was a black Standard Poodle. When we were out, Charlie stayed in our fenced back yard. But when I got home, I would open the kitchen door and call his name. He would come running! Sometimes I'd open the back gate and call Charlie to take him for a walk. But if a stranger came to the gate and called him, do you think Charlie would come to him? No way! A dog knows his pet-parent's voice and will only do what that person tells him to do.

Do you know the same thing is true of sheep? Jesus said that sheep recognize their shepherd's voice and when they do, they follow him. If Jesus is our shepherd, we will know His voice and do what He wants us to do.

Sometimes, other people will try to get us to do something we shouldn't. If Jesus is our shepherd, we won't listen to their voice. Other times, Satan or his demons try to tempt us to act in a sinful way. If Jesus is our shepherd, we won't listen to the devil's voice ... or at least, we try not to. And, those times when we *do* listen to a strange voice and wander off the path to follow it, Jesus is there to forgive us.

Because the Good Shepherd always wants what is best for His sheep. He leads them into green pastures where they have plenty to eat. He leads them to water so that they have plenty to drink. He leads them to shelter where they will be safe from storms and enemies. Jesus wants what is best for us. In John 10:10, He says that He came so that we could have life and have it abundantly. We will, if we listen consistently to His voice and follow Him.

Cynthia Boyd, our Administrative Assistant for now, is fascinated by sheep. Recently, she attended an educational day at a local sheep farm. She had a chance to observe the animals in action. When I asked her what they were like, she marveled at how stubborn they were: "They just seemed to want to go their own way, and do their own thing, no matter what."

I replied, "Well, that certainly sounds a lot like us. No wonder Jesus compared us to sheep." But then she talked about how the sheep dog could corral all the critters into the barn by barking certain commands at them. This wasn't the shepherd, but again, the dog's voice was *familiar* to those ewes and lambs. Like them, we'll follow the voice we're most familiar with. Since, in today's world there are a lot of different voices bombarding our ears—and our soul—let's be sure it's *Jesus' voice* we're listening to and obeying. One of the best places to find His voice is in Holy Scripture.

Cynthia was also amazed that those who were keeping the sheep not only had named each one, but also, they knew each sheep and called them by name. And doesn't Jesus do the same for us? When we look at a flock of sheep in a field, they all look the same to us, just as a bunch of people might. But our Lord knows each of us individually and intimately, and He cares for us in the ways we specifically require, meeting our deepest needs. Let us trust in Him to do this!

In Jesus' time, shepherding was listed by the rabbis as being one of those professions no law-abiding Jew should teach to their children. Even in the Middle Ages, shepherds were seen as undesirable. Their constant and devoted care of their sheep, day in and day out, meant they couldn't attend church or take part in religious festivals. In fact, in centuries gone by, shepherds were buried with a strand of wool in their hands so that when they reached the pearly gates, the reason for their not going to church would be clear. However, this total and utter devotion of the shepherd to his flock—devotion uninterrupted even by the demands of religion—is how Jesus chose to describe His devotion to us.<sup>3</sup>

And because Christ calls us to be as much like Him as we can be, we too are called to share in the task of shepherding. Jesus' last request to the Apostle Peter was, "If you love Me, then feed My sheep" (John 21:17). Like Jesus, we are called to feed His lambs and tend his sheep, as we share in God's love for the lost, the needy, the hurting, and the loveless. We are called to seek them out and bring them home, sharing the healing power of God's grace with all whom we encounter. If we feel we aren't up to the task, we should pray for Christ to equip and strengthen us for ministry and mission. And, because our Good Shepherd is faithful, He will empower us to reach out effectively in His Name.

I'd like to close with a benediction based on Philippians 1:6 and Hebrews 13:20-21:

May the One who began a good work among you  
bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ, and may the God of Peace,  
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep,  
by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good  
so that you may do His will, working among us that which is pleasing in His sight,  
through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. "I Am The Door," SermonIllustrations.com, 16 April 2002, via <illustrations@clergy.net> 17 April 2023. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. J. Jeffrey Smead, "Seek the Kalos Shepherd," 22 April 2015, SermonCentral.com <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/seek-the-kalos-shepherd-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-shepherd-193153> 20 April 2023. Used with permission.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. "Sermon: Good Shepherd Sunday," Church of England in Essex and East London, Diocese of Chelmsford, 22 April 2018 <https://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/uploads-new/sermon-podcasts/Easter\_4\_Sermon.pdf> 21 April 21, 2023. Used with permission.