

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

April 25, 2021 – FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YR. B.

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Needful Sheep*”

Acts 4:5-12 (Salvation is given through none other than Jesus Christ)
Psalm 23 (The Lord is our Shepherd, we shall not want)
1 John 3:16-24 (From great love, Christ laid down His life for us; we are to love with that same love)
St. John 10:11-18 (Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gives His life for His sheep)

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always ‘Good Shepherd Sunday,’ and this morning, sheep abound in two of our four Scripture lessons: First, in the much-cherished 23rd Psalm and then, the section of St. John’s Gospel where Jesus declares “I am the good shepherd.”

Over the centuries, this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd has been enormously appealing. The quantity of stained-glass windows, paintings, music, and poetry—not to mention needlepoint designs, music boxes, and bookmarks—that this image has inspired, is beyond measure. And the number of sermons, articles, hymns, retreats, and meditations devoted to this theme is doubtless, equally vast. So, it is with some trepidation that any preacher wanders into this specific pasture and tackles these particular critters. One needs to watch where one steps!

Still, in all the words read and sung on the subject of the Good Shepherd and His sheep, there is one thing no one talks about. It has to do with the simple question: “Why do shepherds have sheep?” Not something we tend to think much about.

Well, shepherds keep sheep for pretty much the same reasons that ranchers keep cows, farmers keep cotton, and the Colonel keeps chickens. Being a shepherd and caring for the sheep, and being a sheep and having a shepherd, will, sooner or later, result in either wool or lamb chops. There’s just no avoiding it. That reality doesn’t show up in the stained-glass windows, or the cutesy paraphrases of the 23rd Psalm on saccharine greeting cards. However, we should keep these two things—wool and lamb chops—in mind.

In a sense, this productivity is somewhat encouraging. After all, a downside of this shepherd-and-sheep arrangement—notwithstanding its popularity—is that sheep have a reputation for being passive, stupid, conformist, docile, dull. And at times, stubborn and hostile. So if we are the sheep of our Lord’s pasture, does that mean we are supposed to just hang around, occasionally get lost or butt heads, and not do much of anything other than look adorable and be taken care of, because there’s no way we could survive for 15 minutes on our own? It’s too easy to interpret the shepherd-sheep analogy as meaning we aren’t worth very much, and we aren’t very capable.

But remember, shepherds don’t keep sheep as pets. After all, sheep aren’t that much fun to have around. Instead, there are reasons for the whole enterprise, and expectations for all concerned. Sheep are useful, they are important, indeed they are *necessary*. If the sheep don’t produce, the shepherd is flat out of business. Which brings us back to wool and lamb chops. And milk for cheese, or lanolin for soap. This is the part of the Good Shepherd story that’s about us; it is about our part in the familiar and comfortable poetry about green pastures and still waters. The Lord *expects* things of us! He doesn’t want or need *useless* sheep.

The point is not that there’s some unpleasant fine print at the bottom of Jesus’ promise to be the Good Shepherd, or that He’s only a good shepherd for the most useful ones in the flock. Jesus isn’t going to leave us to the wolves or turn us into pet food—or whatever is done with worthless sheep—if we don’t produce. Our Lord cares for us and wants to bless us. After all, He laid down His life for us. That sacrifice, that love, and the continued care He lavishes on us, are free gifts. They are given without condition and without exception.

We don’t try to do good stuff in the hope that God will be nicer to us or love us more. There is no “more.” We already have the totality of God’s love—forever. Nevertheless, God has expectations of us. Remember, the wool and the lamb chops? The care that the Lord offers us is intended to spur us on to something substantial. We are to produce, to give back, from who we are: from what we can do, from what our situation in life is, and from our various skills, abilities, resources, and gifts.

We can't grow fleece; that's not in our nature. But it is in our nature to worship and to serve; to reach out and to share; to study God's Word and to pray; to increase in holiness and to tell the truth; to seek for justice and to be willing to sacrifice. It is in our nature to choose to grow, in a disciplined and steady way, into the fullness of the stature of the Person of Christ—and to do this in community, and with integrity.

This is what God expects of us, His sheep. Now, I'm not talking just about church work—Sunday mornings and Vestry meetings—although that's certainly part of it. Rather, this is about the *Shepherd's* work, which is much larger and a whole lot more interesting. And it may cost us; in fact, it can cost us a lot. Once more, remember: wool and lamb chops. By now, you're asking: "What does that mean?" Wool is a product of great value that sheep contribute temporarily, or we could say, superficially. But by the time a sheep becomes mutton stew, it has suffered much, and has made the ultimate sacrifice.

None of us knows just how much the Lord may require of us over the course of our lives, but in whatever way He may need us, every one of Jesus' sheep has purpose, value, and worth, and each is uniquely important. Each and every one of us can contribute, and is called to contribute, in some way or another, to the mission and ministry of Christ's Church. You can never be too young or too old, or too new or too ordinary, or too busy or too unqualified, or too ornery, or too sick, or too *anything*, to avoid the reality of wool and lamb chops.¹

We are not chosen, selected, or protected by our Good Shepherd for the sake of our own comfort, convenience, personal needs, or ease of life. Nobody in the Bible was ever chosen for that sort of stuff. Rather, God's care and protection are always given so that we might be spiritually strengthened, and better equipped for *His* service. The extent of God's loving care means that something special, something more, is expected of each of us.

When I decided to title this sermon "Needful Sheep," I thought I'd better look up "needful." Oddly enough, it means two things: Needed, as well as needing, or in need of. And when you think about it, we are both. We are in need of a good shepherd, and the Good Shepherd needs us. Without us, without any single one of us, His work is diminished. We matter. We matter to Him, and to His work in this world. We aren't pets, kept for our herder's amusement. We are valuable assets to the Lord of Life Himself.

The Federal Government identifies us by our Social Security number. The state recognizes us by our driver's license number. The bank verifies us by our account number. The doctor's office connects us with our medical chart number. The mail carrier knows us by our house number or PO Box. And on and on. Sometimes we wonder if anybody knows us *at all* without a *number*!

So whenever you feel like nothing more than a number in an anonymous world, be assured, the Good Shepherd knows you intimately and personally. And because He loves you, He calls you by name, a name which God tells the prophet Isaiah (40:16) "is written on the palms of My hands."

So, as we continue forward through this Eastertide, let us be alert to the voice of our Good Shepherd, Jesus, and follow Him with confidence wherever he leads us. After all, we are important to His purposes. We are "needful sheep"!

I'd like to close with a prayer for this Sunday from the Church of Scotland:

Shepherd of the lost and the lowly, of the weak and worn out,
who sets a feast to satisfy the need of heart, soul, and imagination;
may Your desire to feed all people bring new expressions
of the fullness of Your love
as those of faith reach out with justice, mercy and grace;
through Jesus Christ Your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with You,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen.*²

¹ Adapt. James Liggett, "Wool and Mutton," *Sermons That Work*, 26 April 2015 <<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2015/04/06/4-easter-b-2015/>> 25 April 2015.

² MaryAnn Rennie, "Starters for Sunday: Fourth Sunday of Easter, 26 April 2015," *Church of Scotland* <http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/26128/26_April_2015.pdf> 25 April 2015.