



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

Good Shepherd Sunday, April 18th, 2010
Being the Second Sunday After Easter

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

The Second Sunday after Easter has come to be known as Good Shepherd Sunday because today's communion epistle and gospel dwell on the theme of Jesus Christ as the shepherd of his people. This image of God as shepherd of his people runs throughout the Old and New Testaments.

As it's fashionable these days to find a psychological explanation for everything, it's hardly surprising that anthropologists have discovered one to explain this powerful piece of imagery. From Abraham onwards, the folks who came to be known as the Children of Israel were nomadic shepherds. Their flocks of goats and sheep provided their food, their clothing and their medium of exchange; their money.

Their living was wholly dependent on their herds. And this sheep-herding imagery was so deeply burned into their national sub-consciousness that by the time of Christ – a thousand years after sheep had ceased to be the Jewish people's chief economic mainstay – they still harked back to their nomadic origins to conjure up their image of God.

This might well be so, but while anthropologists are, doubtless, well informed about human beings, they sure don't know very much about sheep. People who actually acquainted with the creatures would not be so swift to choose to describe themselves as sheep.

There is no doubt God is intimately acquainted with the shortcomings of sheep. After all, he created them. And in view of the average sheep's glaring deficiencies in the intellectual department, it seems somewhat inappropriate that he should have chosen these animals to serve as a metaphor for human beings. When all's said and done, we are the most intelligent of his creatures.

And it isn't as though God doesn't have other livestock from which to draw his imagery. There is, for instance, the wily, enterprising goat with whom sheep share the sparse pastures of the Holy Land. There is the irascible, obstinate and decidedly cunning camel. There is the humble, hardworking, practical donkey. But no, God opted for sheep. Therefore it may be that he is trying to tell us something?

When we scan the Bible and the secular history of the human race, we see a sad cycle of periods of moral collapse, followed by periods of regeneration, again followed by collapse. Today, we live an age of moral collapse; an age in which fundamental ethics – my word is my bond, example – have been thrown to the wind.

Judging from this dreary catalogue of failure, it seems singularly appropriate to compare human beings with sheep. Despite our ability to reason, we are as daft, obstinate, obtuse and irrational as sheep. We are no less prone to self-destructive

whims and impulses. Like sheep, we are often even more idiotic en masse than on our own. We never seem to learn by experience; something that's second nature to dogs, horses and the doltish camel.

In view of all this, it's worth asking why on earth Jesus would want to call himself "shepherd?" As a small boy, it seemed a singularly inappropriate metaphor for the Son of God. I was well acquainted with shepherds – good, bad and indifferent – and they really didn't conform to my idea of Jesus.

In large part it was a question of image: The shepherds I knew didn't look at all like Jesus in my picture books. Jesus walked around in a nice clean night shirt, with a towel on his head. By contrast, the shepherds with whom I was acquainted were clad – winter and summer – in an odd assortment of knitted garments, topped by an exceedingly greasy raincoat and an equally greasy cloth cap.

What's more, when shepherds came into the village, people usually gave them a wide berth. This had nothing to do with prejudice. It was simply a matter of self-preservation. In their church-going clothes, shepherds exuded an unappetizing odor of wet sheep. In work clothes, they positively reeked. Thus, they weren't the sort of folk any reasonable person would be inclined to follow into a wilderness, up a mountain, or anywhere else for that matter.

Surely Jesus could have chosen a better way of describing himself – the Good Cowman," "the Good Gamekeeper," or even the "Good Policeman?" Such names had style! It was impossible to Jesus preaching and performing miracles clad in rubber boots, a mound of unraveling wool sweaters, a greasy raincoat and frayed cloth cap.

Much later I discovered how wrong I had been about shepherds and how apt the "Good Shepherd" metaphor is: Shepherds are a tough, dedicated bunch. It takes skill, courage, and a good deal of compassion to handle a flock in a bitter cold lambing season.

Shepherding also requires more than an element of saintliness, too. There are no dumb animals dumber than sheep. Taking care of their need would try the patience of a saint. Sheep are so brainless and stupid only the most patient and kindly people would willingly care for them. Indeed, infinite patience and kindness – not to mention a remarkably strong constitution – are the primary qualifications for a shepherd.

And a shepherd's job in First Century Palestine was far tougher than it was in mid-20th Century rural England. Judea at the time of Christ was a place in which sheep were in constant danger – in danger of being swept away by a mountain torrent, carried off by bandits or ravaged by wolves. The terrain was harsh, and so was the weather: pitiless showers, driving snows and parching heat. A shepherd's life was on the line every minute of the day.

In such circumstances there develops a profound relationship of tenderness and trust between shepherds and their sheep. Unlike British and American shepherds, their Palestinian counterparts don't drive their flocks. The shepherds lead them and, so complete is the bond of trust, the sheep unhesitatingly follow.

This then is the relationship between God and mankind depicted in the imagery of the Good Shepherd. And in many respects it's far more than we deserve because human beings often don't compare favorably even with sheep. For all their faults, sheep are usually able to recognize a good shepherd when they see one. You can't always say that of human beings.

We have no right to feel insulted when Isaiah tells us: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." Rather, we should give heartfelt thanks to God for his patience, tolerance and loving kindness towards us. None but the very best of shepherds would put up with the way we behave. *AMEN*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.