



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Second Sunday After Easter, April 22nd, 2012

In the Name of the Father ✠ and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

The Second Sunday after Easter, is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday. This is because the Epistle and Gospel dwell upon the theme of Jesus Christ as the shepherd of his people. This imagery of God as the Shepherd of His People runs throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. And as it's fashionable these days to find a psychological explanation for everything, it's hardly surprising that modern theologians have discovered one to explain this powerful piece of imagery.

They explain that from Abraham onwards, the people who came to be known as the Children of Israel depended on a pastoral economy. They were nomadic shepherds. Their flocks of goats and sheep furnished their food, their clothing and their medium of exchange; their money.

Their living was wholly dependent on their herds. This sheep-herding imagery was so deeply burned into their national subconscious that by the time of Christ – more than 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.

Folks who buy such theories plainly don't know much sheep. Folks who really do know the creatures aren't likely to be so swift to choose to describe themselves as sheep. Intellectually speaking, you see, sheep are among the most profoundly stupid creatures ever created. At least, this holds true of European and Middle Eastern sheep. Perhaps American sheep are different. I have only a nodding acquaintanceship with them,

but I can't believe they are measurably more intelligent than their Old World cousins.

Sheep, in fact, are so stupid, they are quite incapable of looking after themselves. Left to their own devices, they're hard put to survive. Collectively, they seem to be even more idiotic than they are individually. They mindlessly indulge in all manner of self-destructive behavior.

For example, they appear incapable of distinguishing between foods that are good for them and plants that are likely to make them very ill. If it's green, they generally eat it, no matter the cost. As a consequence, shepherds have to monitor the pasture on which their flocks graze to ensure that they don't eat stuff that gives them colic – a condition which, without prompt action, makes them swell up and die.

Sheep also constantly wander off, getting themselves lost – a fact that explains why sheep dogs are always on the move. They are also prone to panic – so much so that one small, but noisy dog can kill an entire flock of huge, lumbering sheep by panicking them to such a degree that they die of heart attacks. Sheep, in short, are so obtuse, so obstinately stupid that only people of an infinitely patient and kindly disposition would voluntarily take care of them. Indeed, infinite patience and kindness, not to say a remarkably strong constitution are the primary qualifications for a shepherd.

There is no doubt that God is intimately acquainted with the short-comings of sheep. After all, He

created them. In view of the average sheep's glaring deficiencies in the intellectual department, might, at first glance, seem quite inappropriate that God should have chosen these animals to serve as a metaphor for human beings. When all's said and done, aren't we supposed to be the most intelligent of his creatures?

It isn't as though God is short of other livestock from which to draw his imagery. There is, for instance, the crafty and enterprising goat with whom sheep share the sparse pastures of the Holy Land. There is the irascible, obstinate and cunning camel. Then there is the humble, hardworking, uncomplaining donkey. But no. God opted for sheep. Could it be He is trying to tell us something?

Reviewing human history, from earliest times to today, we see a sad cycle of short periods of moral renewal, inexorably followed by moral collapse. Today, we live an age of moral collapse; another of those ages in which virtually anything goes. Most of folks, however, seem blissfully unaware of it – perceiving our tolerance of activities our forebears considered destructive and sinful is a sign not of depravity, but of enlightenment.

The consequences of our indifference to the standards of the past, by contrast, tell a rather different story. Having taught our children morality is simply a matter of personal matter taste, it shouldn't entirely come as a surprise come that we are engulfed in a crime wave of epidemic proportions. We have freed ourselves from our sexual inhibitions, blind to the toll the impoverished and disintegrating families and the abandoned and abused children that have followed in its wake.

We affect surprise that a breakdown of society on such catastrophic scale is afflicting this the most enlightened era in mankind's history. But we shouldn't be. If we'd only take the trouble to scan the pages of the Bible, or even secular history books, we'd learn that it has all happened before – time without number in fact.

In fact, the Prophet Isaiah – from whose book which this morning's Old Testament lesson is taken – lived in times much like our own: times of deep depravity and apostasy.

The people of Judah had abandoned God. They had installed Assyrian idols in the Temple. It was a time of free sex and instant self-gratification. It was an age so corrupt that parents sacrificed their own children to a evil Phoenician deity called Molech.

Jesus was also speaking at a time of great apostasy. To be sure, there were many good and earnest people – Pharisees, for instance – who tried to live by God's Law. But there were even larger numbers of people in the Holy Land who had abandoned their faith in favor of fashionable Greek and Roman customs.

Heathen shrines flourished throughout the Holy Land and the people who worshipped at them were Jews. Floggings, stonings and crucifixions provided plenty of bloodthirsty amusements. Sexual license was the order of the day.

It is reasonable to conclude from this 3,500 year-long catalogue of disaster is that it is the sheep, not we humans, that have the right to be upset with God's choice of metaphor. Despite our ability to reason, we are even more obstinate, obtuse and irrational than sheep. To an even greater degree, we are prone to self-destructive whims and impulses. And we are often even sillier en masse than on our own. Moreover, we never seem to learn by experience.

In short, God is not paying us a compliment when he compares us to sheep. Quite to the contrary, in fact. He is telling us that we are entirely unfitted to be running the sheep dip. Indeed, like sheep, any time we seize control of our own affairs we inevitably end up in serious trouble.

A second conclusion is that if we hope prosper it's vital we submit to the leadership of a shepherd. There are, of course, plenty of applicants vying for the job. But there is only one good shepherd: Jesus Christ. The other applicants are sheep – phonies, knaves and comen who will lead us to destruction.

In other words when Isaiah writes: "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," God is making us an offer we'd be most unwise to refuse.

AMEN