

✠◆. STEPHEN'S
ANGLICAN CHURCH
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Second Sunday after Easter
May 5, 2019

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The passage selected for the Sermon this morning comes from the Gospel:

“JESUS said, I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.”

The imagery of shepherding runs throughout Scripture. Ezekiel prophecies the coming of the Messiah in terms of the Good Shepherd. King David tended sheep before he was anointed to his high office. In fact, it was as a shepherd that he perfected his prowess with the sling by killing both a bear and a lion that threatened his flock. That prowess was put to test later against Goliath. Even at the birth of the Messiah, the angels proclaimed his arrival by singing to shepherds, and shepherds were the first to pay homage to the infant, long before Wise Men brought gifts or Herod brought treachery.

Of course it would be comfortable for Jesus to speak about His ministry using the same imagery. It both fulfills prophecy, and translates into the kind of vivid picture that represents his courage, sacrificial love, and his protective concern for his Sheep. In the 5th Chapter of Luke, Jesus proclaims the depth of his compassion in the parable of the shepherd who would leave the 99 sheep to track down the one lost lamb. The single most common image of Jesus in the

catacombs was as the Good Shepherd, and artists throughout history have represented Jesus that way. One of the most touching paintings is by a German, Tissot. In his work, Jesus has the lamb wrapped around his neck as he carries it down a dangerous precipice in a wild and rocky landscape. That painting captures not only the tenderness of Jesus for his flock, but the real dangerous spiritual terrain that the sheep have to navigate to come home to the safety of heaven.

In today's passage from St. John, Jesus reflects back to the imagery of the prophecy in Ezekiel about the Good Shepherd. By proclaiming Himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus is sending the message to the Jewish people, and especially to the Scriptural authorities and priests, that He is indeed the Messiah. Even more powerfully, by using the “I AM” in his proclamation, He not only announces his fulfillment of the prophecy, He declares that the Messiah is in fact the very God that spoke to Moses from the burning bush. There can be no doubting His authority, not simply as a national leader, but as the bridge between Good and Man, the very Son of God.

In this passage, as in Ezekiel, Jesus contrasts Himself as the Good Shepherd to the false shepherds who abuse their authority and compromise the welfare of the sheep. The false shepherds are condemned in the strongest way, consigned to suffering and Hell for their failed

ministry. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep, and is known by them. He is not only their comfort in this world, but he is the very door to the sheepfold, which is everlasting life.

We are very comfortable with the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It is the corollary that we struggle to embrace. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, it means that we are His sheep, and we rankle at being considered as sheep. Americans especially have trouble with the imagery. We are rugged individualists, we are our “own men”, free thinkers and privileged persons. We think of sheep as conformists, as the general crowd, the underprivileged and unthinking masses.

In fact, though, we really are sheep. What we count as rugged individualism and privilege is most often rationalization and lack of awareness. Like sheep, we don't know when we are well off, when we are safe, when we are part of the safety of a community. We are more the lost lamb than the rugged individualist. We wander away from the flock. We think we can navigate the dangers of life on our own. We are absorbed by the pursuit of our whims and desires and because we aren't paying attention, we wander into spiritual danger easily and often. We often find ourselves alone in the wilderness, separated from family and community, on our own against the kind of dangers for which we are unfit to battle.

In fact, against the reality of spiritual warfare, we are as weak and defenseless as a lamb. On our own we are no match for the legacy of Adam's sin. We can't overcome the ravages of time and sickness. Eventually we fall against those foes. We want to control our environment and the people around us, but every day we learn that we

can't manipulate and control anyone really, especially those people we want the best for, our friends and our family. Only Jesus was able to overcome the specter of death by His own power. Without His life, we only have a life that ends in dying.

Against our spiritual enemies, we are even less effective. Against our own character, which is proud, selfish, jealous and resentful, we struggle desperately. Against the devil, and his temptations and terrors, we are not equipped to stand at all.

Thank God that we do have a Good Shepherd. That we are guided to green pastures, protected from the dangers of sin, death and the devil. Thank God that we are knit in a community, a flock, this parish, that is loving supportive and under the same watchful eye of the Good Shepherd. Thank God, that He was willing to allow His Son to be not only our Shepherd, but also a Lamb like us, the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world.

The Good Shepherd has given His life for His sheep, and He has taken that life back and bestowed it on us so that we too can live with Him in the safety of His life and love forever. That is the wonderful comfort of the passage, that Jesus has given us his life, so that we can persist on the journey to the place He would lead us, back home with to live with the Father and Holy Ghost forever.

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

