

**4 Easter
May 12, 2019**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

Today is often known as Good Shepherd Sunday because of the theme set by the opening Collect, the 23rd Psalm, the words from our second Lesson from Revelation, and the Gospel. I have often said that if anyone wants to let their thoughts wander during our worship service, they should wait until AFTER the Opening Collect, because that is THE Prayer that sets the entire theme for the day's Scripture readings, the hymns and the sermon so that they are all of a piece. So...it is pretty important. By the way: the word COLLECT... which looks like collect... is a word that means a COLLECTION and indeed, it IS a collection of the bits and pieces that provide the theme for our worship. So...hear again today's opening COLLECT: "Oh God, whose son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice, we know him who calls us each by name, and follows where he leads, ..." /// It's interesting to me that most of us have probably carried into adult life our childhood pictures of Jesus as the tender shepherd...//.and that's fine. But... shepherds are also a tough breed; they have to be. First century shepherds were strong and robust. They could nurse a tiny lamb back to health, ... but they also could fight off anyone or anything that threatened their flock. When the shepherd boy, David, declared that he was ready to fight the giant Goliath, he proclaimed his fitness by telling Saul that "whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, he went after it and struck it down." In the same fashion, shepherds had to defend their flocks against thieves and hoodlums, and even sometimes from small armies who wanted meat for the troops. This was not a job for timid souls.

That's the scene we should keep in mind as we think about today's Gospel. Here's the background. Jesus had healed a blind man. Who did he think he was?! AND, he had done so on the Sabbath. Well, this really stirred up the rising opposition of the religious leaders. But, what did Jesus do? He responded by suggesting that these leaders were more blind than the man he had just healed. Whoa!

And that's where today's story begins. As today's Gospel reports it, Jesus was confronted about who he was. He went directly into his portrayal of himself as the Good Shepherd as a way to have his challengers get it about who he was, so different from how they were trying to cast him. And he begins by describing the enemies of the sheep. When the TRUE shepherd comes, the sheep know his voice and he calls his sheep by name. They won't follow a stranger because they don't know the stranger's voice. Then we read that the enemies of Jesus didn't get what he was driving at; He says, "...you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me.

I know that the part of the story about the sheep knowing the shepherd's voice is true because of a personal experience. This happened to me while I was the Associate Pastor at Trinity .. here in St. Augustine. When we first moved to St. Augustine, I had a cat that was my own wonderful sweetest. In fact, I named her "Cutest" because she was. That was always a challenge when I took her to the

vet and they said.... and the name of your cat...and I would say Cutest...well because she was..and they would say words like yeh yeh but what IS her name... This cutest spent many a night curled up on my lap while I wrote a sermon. If any of you have a cat in your life, you know that you cannot disturb THE CAT. I must add that she was jet black with a white collar. Seemed sorta' priestly to me. But, the tragedy is that one time when Dick and I had to be away for a few days, we left my precious Cutest at our vet as a boarder. When we returned and I went to get her and mentioned her name, all the technicians reacted and said that she was that nasty cat, the one that hissed and scratched anybody who came near her. She was so nasty, that they said I should go back in the kennel to get her myself because they did not want to go anywhere near her. I couldn't believe my ears – she was the sweetest cat imaginable. But they insisted I get her myself, so as I entered the kennel area, I started calling her name, I kept calling Cutest...Cutest. and then I heard her loud purring as I approached her cage. I took her out and she immediately cuddled on my shoulder. Obviously, she knew my voice, heard it and returned to being her sweet self instead of being the nasty cat the others had experienced. On such a small scale I realized that, just as my Cutest knew my voice, and sheep know their shepherds voice, we truly know the voice of our Good Shepherd.

The Lord said, "No one will snatch them out of my hand.

Perhaps what Jesus said doesn't interest us that much as long as we limit it to back then... to the first century. That is, we are willing to acknowledge that Jesus had enemies in the first century. And we can understand why he opposed them vehemently. But, think of it,: Does Jesus still have enemies? Certainly the opposition to our Lord didn't end in the year 33 A.D. Of course, Jesus has enemies in the year 2019.

It's popular to say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere about it, and you are a good person." But, it's interesting, isn't it, that we don't feel that way when it's our surgeon, our stock broker, or even the person who gives us directions when we are in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Being sincere isn't enough. We want knowledge and certainty. So...there's a tough side to this shepherding business, because shepherding means not only snuggling lambs in your arms; it also means fighting off the lions and bears and thieves and marauders of this life. Because in this world of ours there IS right and there IS wrong, there is truth and there are lies. The Good Shepherd must be tough and ever vigilant because he cares for the sheep. If we read further along past today's appointed Gospel, it tells us that Jesus said that the "hired hand" will run away when he sees the wolf coming, but the true shepherd stays to protect his sheep.

But that's not all. Jesus said, "I came that they (you and I) may have life and have it abundantly." Abundantly! It's a powerful word. In Greek the word means to have a surplus, SUPER abundance. Well, certainly a good many people have a surplus of life, an abundance, an overflow. And, indeed, one of the saddest things is that so many live with far less, and many, many are in need, too many desperately so. But, when I say that our Lord means for us to have life and have it abundantly, I don't mean that we will have more money than other people, or more success. I mean that we will truly know more of what has been given to us. It is not simply that we GET more when we experience the wonder of God's creation, the Love of God in our lives, the life that Jesus offers us, but rather that our ability to perceive, and to appreciate, to live a life of gratitude, is immeasurably increased. So life has a sense of abundance because it is touched with Love and with a sense of everlastingness....

And this is why the Good Shepherd is sometimes tough. It is because he cannot bear it that his sheep, his precious ones, us, should wander in barren dust... when he has intended for them...for us to know green pastures and still waters. So God in Jesus opposes anything that might keep us from a fullness of life.

Jesus told his followers something that applies for all time. ...that applies to us. He speaks of those who follow him, who are committed to him and he makes the point to those who do NOT follow him..."You do not believe because you do not know my voice." The call of our Lord is in the midst of a whole chorus of worldly voices which call to us. Jesus says that our ability to hear him... and to believe in him grows out of our relationship with him, and this relationship, in turn, grows out of our commitment to follow him. It is by following the true shepherd into pastures of blessing that we truly find peace. It is by hearing his voice and following him in all our decisions that we go the right way. Remember, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That's what Easter is all about.

There is a very tender story about our Lord as the Good Shepherd which I read some years ago. You may already know it, but it is so sweet. There was a little boy who was very, very sick. His parents and grandparents and his older brother were understandably very worried. One day their Pastor came to see the little boy, and he spoke to him about the Good Shepherd. He showed him a picture of Jesus gently carrying the little lamb to safety. And then he did something powerful: he had the little boy hold up his hands and the Pastor taught him to use his fingers to help him to know that the Lord was with him, that he was HIS Good Shepherd. He taught him to say: (((start with little finger))) The Lord Is My Shepherd. And they said this together this way over and over. After the Pastor left, the boy eagerly shared what he had learned with his family. (((start with little finger))) The Lord Is My Shepherd.

Many times, as the little boy was getting sicker and weaker and weaker, the family would say those precious five words with him. When he died, he had a smile on his face and he was holding on to his thumb...to his Shepherd.

Our Lord is a remarkable Shepherd! Tender to shelter the helpless lamb, always there to guide the lost sheep home, and tough enough to protect us. Tough enough, indeed, to stay with us no matter what.

In the words of our Opening Collect, "Grant that when we hear his voice, we know him who calls each of us by name, and we follow where he leads." The Lord IS our Shepherd; we shall not want!!
AMEN