

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A, May 7, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Jesus Our Shepherd”
Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

perhaps you have in your mind an image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd; you’ll notice that in our reading today Jesus talks about sheep and a shepherd without calling himself the shepherd or using the word “good;” in fact, he calls himself instead “the gate for the sheep;” but he does call himself “the Good Shepherd” in the very next verse that follows the place our reading ends today, and the Good Shepherd image is the one from this part of John’s gospel that has stuck with us

many depictions of the Good Shepherd in art portray a rather young boy with a lamb draped across his shoulders; Christ & Grace does not have that specific image in any of the stained glass here, but we do have a shepherd rescuing the lost sheep with his shepherd’s crook (4th pair of windows back from the pulpit, center left panel); the boy shepherd with lamb images originated not from Jesus, who was never a young shepherd boy himself, but rather from the young David, who was a shepherd boy before he became king; recall that when Samuel (1st Samuel 16—we read this in church about a month ago) comes to the house of Jesse because the Lord has told him to anoint one of Jesse’s sons king, David’s father doesn’t even bother to call his youngest son in from the fields where he is out keeping the sheep; this image has gotten transposed into the Christian artwork depicting Jesus—also known as the son of David; and in these depictions of the Good Shepherd we see a wonderful shared image that ties us to Judaism; but while such depictions are striking and beautiful, they may also be misleading to us as we try to imagine Jesus as our Shepherd

my image of the Good Shepherd shifted dramatically after an experience I had many years ago in the South of France; I was traveling by car with other students to visit several of the châteaux Cathares, the mountaintop fortresses from the time of the Albigensian Crusade on the remote French side of the Pyrenees; we came around a tight bend on a narrow and steep mountainous road to find a large man blocking our way: legs spread wide, one arm held out commanding us to stop, the other one holding a massive staff; he was

wrapped in a dark cloak and hood which blew in the cold wind and made him look like an otherworldly and dangerous character; I was not quite sure what would happen next when one of the French students piped up and said, “don’t worry, he’s a shepherd”; then sure enough, filing across the road behind him came his flock; he was literally putting his own life on the line—in the middle of the road—to keep us from plowing into his sheep; we waited until he and his flock had crossed the road before continuing on our way

if I were a sheep this is definitely the kind of shepherd I would entrust my life to; come to think of it, we are sheep and we have entrusted our lives to the shepherd who did just that: laid down his life for us, his flock; and more than just in the way we picture Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the shepherd image can be instructive to us in several other ways

first, as in our gospel reading today, Jesus says sheep follow follow the shepherd because they know his voice; this means we need to keep our ears tuned for the voice of Jesus; we must be able to recognize his voice among the many other voices calling to us; and this may not only be in the words of scripture or of prayer; it may equally be through the voice of a friend or that of a total stranger; we may recognize it at an unexpected time, in an unexpected place, or in an unexpected context; and the words themselves may be words we do not expect to hear; the Bible is full of stories about surprises—what kind of surprises might Jesus have in store for you?

next, we also have to see him and keep our eyes on him in order to follow him; remember the parable of the sheep and the goats; (Matt 25:37-40) “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the answer is, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”; what does it take for us to learn to see Jesus in the least of people around us?

next, following him also suggests that we must allow ourselves to be led to places we might not otherwise go; because we are not following the Good Shepherd if we are picking out our own path; my experience is that by following the shepherd down new paths—paths not of my own choosing, scary paths, even ones I’m pretty sure I don’t want to be led down—I have

been given the grace to experience God's power and presence in ways I never would have otherwise

finally, following the shepherd reminds us this is not solely a one-on-one relationship with Jesus; we are part of a flock, and it is a flock of many sizes: family, parish, neighborhood, city, region, diocese, nation, or the entire world, and in a way that includes Christians of all other denominations, believers of other faiths, and people of no faith at all; in God's eyes we are part of that flock that includes all people—all God's children, since everyone born is made in the image of God; maybe many of them are not aware of the Good Shepherd just yet, but how will those people ever learn how to see, hear, and follow the shepherd if we don't demonstrate how to follow him by the example we set with our lives; and how will they ever come to see, hear, and follow the shepherd themselves if we don't invite them into the flock?

spend some quiet and prayerful time this week with this gospel passage asking yourself these questions: just when, where, and how do you hear the Good Shepherd?; just when, where, and how do you see the Good Shepherd?; just when, where, and how do you follow the Good Shepherd?; just when, where, and how are you aware of being a part of the Good Shepherd's local to worldwide flock?; you may want to pray and meditate on the 23rd Psalm to help you in this, as the Psalmist is essentially doing the same thing: reflecting upon his relationship with the Shepherd; or you may want to visualize someone like a burly mountain shepherd as he seeks a safe passage for his flock through dangerous rocky gorges, to the places he knows will have water and grass; we can trust that our Good Shepherd will take more than good care of us; and we, in our turn, are supposed to extend that good shepherding care to everyone around us