

Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday: The 4th Sunday of Easter

For as many years as I can remember, I have been fascinated with the image of the Good Shepherd. My first parish as rector was called the Church of the Good Shepherd, Pawtucket, Rhode Island. As I think back to my days there, I will always remember the people who loved and cared for me and each other. A couple of years ago, I sat on the beach with my first senior warden who was in many so many ways my shepherd. He was very much involved in the Rhode Island Council of Churches. I soon joined the board. We also worked together on campus ministry, Cursillo, and diocesan youth, and refugee ministries. As I look back, he taught me to know that we are all shepherds together of a flock much like a large family who struggle to minister to changing neighborhoods and world beyond them. Thayer and I were truly blessed to be with Frank and his wife, Roberta again this winter.

As we think of the 23rd Psalm this morning, we might recall that Israel had become much more urban in the thousand years since the time of David, the shepherd king,... so the image of the Lord as my shepherd would seem strange. Shepherds were the equivalent of the Samaritan in Luke's Gospel. They occupied the lowest rung of society. Shepherds often ended up as the hired hands of the urban, absentee landlords of Jesus' parables. Shepherds were seen as unreliable at best or borderline bandits at worst.

The Episcopal Church has had at least one shepherd bishop in recent years. Bishop Steven Plummer, the first Navajo bishop in the Episcopal Church, died several years ago after a heroic battle with cancer. He was just 60, but his life was one patterned after that of the Good Shepherd.

The son of a medicine man, Plummer lived all of his ordained life in Navajoland. Soft spoken, with an easy smile, Plummer was a shepherd in both a literal and figurative sense. The Plummer's maintained a small herd of sheep at their home in Bluff, Utah on the grounds of St. Christopher's Church.

Steven gradually led the Navajoland on a path toward greater incorporation of Navajo

traditions into Episcopal Church worship. He strived to encourage development of indigenous leadership among the Navajo and a more self-reliant Navajo Episcopal church. These efforts included the development of the "hogan seminary" known as Hogan Learning Circle in Navajoland. "Hogan" is the word for the traditional Navajo house.

Carol Hampton recalls: "A few years ago, a friend and I were driving across the Navajo Nation to visit Steven Plummer,, when we came upon a flock of sheep grazing near the road. My friend asked me to stop and take a photograph of her with the sheep. As soon as she got out of the car, the sheep moved away, and, as she walked toward them, they again moved farther from the road. They would not let her get anywhere close enough for my camera to get both her and the sheep in the same frame. They did not know her voice and stayed safely far away.

"Bishop Plummer knew his sheep and they knew him. He often practiced his sermons by preaching to his sheep. They listened to his voice, which they recognized. They stayed near him knowing that they were safe. This is the environment we need to foster in our community of faith for all who enter."

In our time and in our very secular society, there are many voices competing for our attention. We may lose the voice of our shepherd and go astray from time to time and fall into danger, perhaps following a voice that sounds strong and smart and seductive, but different. We may follow it down a path that leads us away from Christ. The challenge for all of us today is to encourage each other to listen again for the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Bishop Mark MacDonald wrote the following about Steven:

"Only Plummer's family knew the many obstacles Steven faced in his life: colonialism and racism, especially the systemic and structural racism; the cruel math of much work to do with few resources to accomplish it; opposition from within and without Navajoland; and, finally, the health problems that stalked him the last part of his life.

Bishop Rustin Kemsey, in reflecting on Steven's life and Ministry says: *“As with most Native religions, there are strong intersections of complimentary belief between them and Christianity, but there are also differences in how reality is shaped in our minds and customs in our lives. Steven's spiritual journey was a walk that consistently attempted to honor both traditions, and in his striving (and succeeding) he offers us a path into our journeys as well.*

“Whether we know it or not, each of our lives strives to "fit" our particular context of life into the beliefs we choose to live by. ... Steven knew the Navajo tradition was a unique and rich resource into which the Gospel of Jesus Christ could thrive and live. Indeed, you could not hear him pray or preach without being deeply moved by his clarity of how the two puzzles fit together, so that the Navajo way becomes the way of Christ I have seen him use the water of Baptism as he entered a Church to remind his heart and mind of Christ, and I have seen him splash himself with porous sand on the Navajo holy site that houses Spider Rock, to remind his heart and mind of the ancient ways and beliefs of the Dine, his people.”

This morning we will baptize Adam, a name from Scripture that the Hebrew people used for the first human, but also for all of us. Adam simple means “earth creature.” Indeed our Adam is a very special “earth creature” whose life could stretch beyond this century. My prayer for him is the same prayer that I have for his parents and godparents that they will hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow him always despite the challenges face each of them in our time.