

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, Easter 4, May 3, 2009, Acts 4: 5-12, Psalm 23, I John 3: 16-24, John 10: 11-18
+In the Name of Jesus Christ, the Universal Shepherd. Amen.

Many a parish in the Episcopal Church is named for the Good Shepherd. When I was in seminary I served as the seminary intern at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Midland Park, N.J. This Sunday in Eastertide when we read the Gospel of John where Jesus says to his followers, "I am the Good Shepherd.", has always been Good Shepherd Sunday. When this day rolled around on the calendar at Good Shepherd, Midland Park, the organist found every hymn in the old 1940 hymnal that referred to sheep and we sang them. A very Victorian anthem about sheep and shepherds was dutifully sung by the choir. The rector preached his classic sermon that recited the qualities of every type of sheep ever classified. I guess we were to figure out which type of sheep we were. There are some interesting varieties but I don't know which one I am. Never figured it out.

We have a fair number of sheep and shepherd references in today's liturgy. You can count them if you like, but you know the effect of counting sheep.

Needless to say we all know the 23rd psalm. I memorized it in 3rd grade Sunday School. We recite it at almost every funeral. The opening words are intensely personal and perhaps because of that completely universal. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." This is a prayer to God as our shepherd expressed in the first person singular. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." The prayer invites everyone to say it. It's your prayer, my prayer. It has no boundaries. It requires no denominational affiliation or doctrinal test. It knows no boundaries. For the 23rd Psalm is an act of trust, an expression of faith in a loving God who will see us through the difficult places of life.

In the world of ancient Rome when and where the Christian Church was born the only universal was the emperor and the empire. Society itself was divided in ways we can hardly comprehend between slave and free, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, male and female, and, of course, in Palestine between Jew and Gentile.

Into this world comes One who proclaims himself not as a universal emperor but as the universal shepherd. Jesus says in the Gospel account, "...there will be one flock, one shepherd." The One who announces, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.", this One places no limit on his flock. It is his intention, his will that there will be one flock, one shepherd. This forms the basis of a universal impulse to gather the world together. When Paul wrote that the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female had been broken down, he was following this profound universal understanding of the Gospel.

I would have to say that the Church throughout its long history has often translated this message of the universal shepherd into an exclusive flock of like-minded sheep. Even within the boundaries of the Church the white sheep worship with the white sheep and the spotted sheep with the spotted sheep, the Greek sheep with Greek sheep and the German sheep with the German ones.

Rich and sleek sheep gather and the poor and thin ones nibble in another pasture. Probably not the vision Jesus had of one flock, one shepherd.

The early Christian movement saw Jesus as the universal shepherd who cared for all in the way pictured by the 23rd Psalm. Probably the very first visual representation of Jesus in the ancient world is of Jesus as the good shepherd, a youthful figure with a sheep draped over his shoulders.

Listening to Jesus and to the Gospels I find a conviction that God in Christ broke out of all the ancient divisions humans have imposed upon one another. The dividing wall of hostility was toppled by the Risen Lord who asks us to hear his call and follow him, to be one flock with one shepherd.

And there is this one litmus test for the behavior of the flock. All the sheep of every variety and category are in training by the shepherd. The shepherd asks we follow a universal way of being, "love one another." That is the universal command to the one flock. "Love one another." Love one another in truth and action.

The sheep look to the universal shepherd for guidance. How do we love one another? "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" That's the standard. You see another in need. You respond in generosity and love, welcoming the one in need into the one flock.

We are called to be not just the flock but also to be like shepherds. We see how God in Christ is active in the world and we reflect God's grace and love. The example is clear – a brother or sister in need. The Good Shepherd forms and shapes the flock to be responsive to one another. Whatever acts and words that address the needs of another, there is God's love, the love of the Good Shepherd.

The mission of Christ Church revolves around this. How do we practice the faith? How does this flock first become the universal flock envisioned by the Good Shepherd? Then how do we identify the needs of this city and region? Finally how do we share the gifts we have been given?

One Lord, one shepherd. One faith, one flock. One world in need, one community that loves in truth and action.