

Date: May 4, 2004

SUNDAY: Easter 4

SERMON: Good Shepherd, Secure Sheep

Text(s): John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

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The Monty Python comedy shows done in the 60's and 70's have become classics of the warped-humor genre, transcending their focus on the British political scene that formed the backdrop of so many of them. Many of the sketches are still performed by high school theater groups; our own daughters had most of them memorized, I think. You may remember the sketch in which the host of a television show is interviewing a sheep farmer who has in his flock, a sheep named Harold. Harold, in the farmer's words, "is that most dangerous of animals, a clever sheep." It seems that Harold is trying to teach the other sheep that they can fly if they just put their minds to it. He wants to liberate them from their boring earthbound existence, where they keep their noses to the ground, eating grass, and following their noses wherever their noses take them.

As the interviewer is talking to the farmer, we see in the background several sheep perched in trees, where presumably Harold, the clever sheep, has managed to get them, though by what method we don't know. At any rate, as the interview goes on, one by one, the sheep up in the trees launch themselves off the branches on which they're perched. We then hear a series of dull thuds, as the farmer says, "Well, they don't actually fly so much as they plummet."

Though there are no flying sheep in our lessons today, sheep and shepherds are prominent images in both lessons and the scriptures in general, not surprisingly, given the pastoral cultures out of which the Bible emerged. The image of Jesus as a shepherd is particularly prominent in the Gospel of John. No doubt he derived it from the many images of God as a shepherd of his people Israel from the Hebrew scriptures, such as Psalm 23, which many of us learned by heart in Sunday School, and this image

has become one of the most beloved, if often over-sentimentalized images in Christian culture.

Nearly all of chapter 10 of this Gospel is built around this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. This image is a particularly appropriate one for us to think about as we are about to confirm a whole group of young lambs this morning, and recognize them as they take their place among us, not as children any longer, but as fellow sheep in the flock of God.

But perhaps in order to hear and understand this passage clearly, we need a bit of background to help us avoid sentimentality and really hear what John wants us to hear. In John's gospel in a much more pronounced way than in the other gospels, when we hear Jesus speak, it is virtually always Jesus the Risen Lord of the Church, even though the settings of the stories themselves ostensibly refer to events in the life of the earthly, historical Jesus of Nazareth. That's why Jesus sounds so different in this gospel than he does in the other gospels. He is the Jesus who speaks from eternity rather than from a particular time and place, and yet he addresses those who are living in a particular time and place.

This passage about the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep, is addressed to people in John's community who are in the midst of a heated, and often hostile family feud. Families and synagogues and villages are being split apart over the question of whether Jesus is the Messiah, and those who are believers in Jesus are a beleaguered minority— feeling very much like sheep in the midst of a pack of wolves.

Perhaps with that necessary bit of background, we are better positioned to understand what is going on in this passage, and to some of the rather strange claims made in it about the "sheep" who are the flock of God.

In the earlier part of this chapter, we hear Jesus saying, "*I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" Now that, in itself, is a rather astounding claim. I know that most shepherds will go to a great deal of effort to protect their sheep from

predators—from wolves or coyotes or sheep rustlers, but I don't know too many shepherds who would be willing to die to save the lives of their sheep. As that old Monty Python sketch made all too plain, sheep don't do well on their own, left to themselves and their own leaders. They need tending, they need guidance and wise leadership, they need a caring and compassionate shepherd if they're to flourish. And not all shepherds are good shepherds. There are plenty of bad shepherds around, aren't there.

Thinking of ourselves as sheep who are easily led doesn't necessarily boost our egos. It's not the most flattering image Jesus could have chosen to describe his followers, is it? We would much prefer an image that portrayed our sense of ourselves as always being in control of our own lives and our own destiny, always making wise choices, always moving ahead, always growing in wisdom and wealth and well-being. Who are we kidding? We don't need to look around us very far to see multitudes of people who are being led by bad shepherds, and as a result are wandering lost or alone into some very dangerous and destructive paths.

Within the space of the last two years, look at how many restaurants have done a complete makeover of their menus or food and beverage manufacturers have changed their products (or at least their marketing) to accommodate those who have in good sheep-like fashion have whole-heartedly followed the shepherd named Dr. Atkins and his anti-carbohydrate diet plan.

And speaking of extreme makeovers, you may have seen the NY Times article documenting the "cookie-cutter" approach to beauty on reality-TV shows like *Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* where all the plastic surgery gives all the women high cheekbones and inflated lips, and all the men heroic chins and big white teeth. "It's as if people would rather choose a mask, than look like themselves, or their mother, or daughter," says critic Dr. Nancy Etcoff. Our consumerist culture

is about as sheeplike as it's possible to be. There are any number of would-be "Harolds"—clever fellow sheep who make their living convincing the rest of us to conform to some celebrity-driven fantasy or ideal, clever and who tell us we can fly if we only buy the product they're selling. But all too often, when we've launched ourselves in quest of their dream, there is a corresponding "thud" as gravity asserts its own authority and brings us back to reality.

But it's not only our own sheeplike behavior or bad shepherds that threaten us; there really are predators out there. And like it or not, we are prey. Without a Good Shepherd, without a shepherd whose care for us is so fierce that he is willing to give even his own life in our defense, what chance would we have?

"My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

What a powerful promise! What a source of confidence! Here's a security that not all the "Harolds" or false shepherds can offer us. How do we know that the promise that no one will snatch the sheep out of the Good Shepherd's hand, is true? How can we believe it?

We discover the truth of this promise when we do what the Shepherd says we must do. *"My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me."* Listening and following is the way we discover the security and assurance that the promise holds for us. William Loader, of Murdoch University, in his comment on this passage says, "[This statement] erects no fences. It simply trusts the processes. Like Jesus in this scene, it presents no compelling argument, but only a life, words and deeds. Those words and deeds in John's gospel are not compelling argument. They are presentation and invitation, implying a huge claim: that here is the Son offering life from the Father. The Son is giving the sheep that life, the life he lived."

That is what we are all here for this morning; we're here because of the promise and invitation offered to us as sheep in the Good Shepherd's flock. That's what the parents of our confirmands responded to, whether fully cognizant of their own response or not, when they brought their children for baptism and initiation into the community of the Good Shepherd. That promise and invitation are what these young people are responding to today when they stand in front of us, and we confirm them in their baptismal covenants. Of course they don't yet know all the implications and ramifications of that response, or where this journey will take them. Which of us does? Even those of us who are senior sheep in the flock still don't know what's around the next corner— what toxic pastures, what unseen dangers, what accidents, what lurking predators, what false shepherds may be lying in wait for us. What those of us who are older sheep in the flock may have to offer these younger sheep, however, is some experience in learning how to listen to the Shepherd's voice and follow him where he leads. The confidence we have gained in the leadership of our Shepherd is something we can pass on to the younger sheep in the flock. After all, we are still here, are we not? We haven't yet been snatched out of the Shepherd's hands. We're still part of this community which has nurtured us, which has sustained us, in which we have listened to our Shepherd's voice, in which we have felt his compassionate care and his fierce devotion to us, even through difficult and painful times. It has been our relationships within this flock that have given our lives meaning and richness, and helped us mature and grow.

There are no fences to keep us here, except perhaps the invisible fences woven by love and mutual encouragement and mutual care and mutual obedience to the voice of the Shepherd. And that's what we have to offer these younger sheep as they take their place among us— the confidence that comes from what, of all people,

Frederick Nietzsche, once so aptly described as “a long obedience in the same direction.”

It's that long obedience to the voice of the Good Shepherd, finally, in which we find our true security, and in which we realize, the fullness and richness of our life as a member of the flock of God.