**Easter and Beyond**

**April 29, 2018**

**“Following the Good Shepherd” (John 10:1-18)**

**1. Introduction: *Laying down his life for the sheep***

A tourist in the Middle East observed with interest a shepherd putting his sheep into a sheepfold one evening. The sheepfold had only one opening and there was neither a door nor gate to enclose it. When the tourist noticed this, he asked the shepherd, “Without a door or gate, can’t the sheep escape? And what’s keeping predators from getting in and attacking them?

The shepherd answered, “Nothing can get in or get out at night because I am the door. When the sheep are in the sheepfold, I lie across the doorway. No sheep can get out except over my body and no wolf can get in except over me.”

This little anecdote nicely captures the message of the metaphor in this morning’s Gospel lesson. The larger context of this passage contains a beautiful mixed metaphor that describes Jesus as the Good Shepherd of the sheep and the Gate of the sheepfold. These two images are closely related and emphasize that Jesus both protects and gives life to those who follow him. On the one hand, Jesus is the *gate* for the sheepfold, guarding the sheep from thieves and robbers who try to sneak over the wall (10:1). Only the true shepherd enters through the gate and has access to the sheep (10:2). The sheep also enter through Jesus, the gate, and are savedand are given abundant life(10:9-10). Jesus is also the *good shepherd* who lays down his life for the sheep, protecting them from the ravenous wolves that wish to attack and scatter the flock (10:11-13). While the hired hand flees at the first sign of danger, the good shepherd stands his ground and risks his life for the sake of the sheep. Jesus, the good shepherd, also leads the sheep to green pastures where they receive abundant life (10:3-4, 9).

The images of Jesus as sheep-gate and good shepherd are a source of great comfort to all Christians because they illustrate the loving care and the abundant life that we receive from our Lord. Our tendency, however, is to limit the Good Shepherd’s care to the confines of these four walls. Safe within the sheepfold, the Good Shepherd protects us from the thieves and the robbers who try to jump over the wall and snatch away the abundant life that the Good Shepherd gives to us (10:1, 10). In other words, he guards against any false shepherds who take advantage of the sheep for their own benefit. At the same time the Good Shepherd draws other sheep into the fold and creates *one* flock, unified under *one* shepherd (10:16). Certainly, there is a true sense of safety, trust and fellowship that we share as we gather together as Christians. But the Good Shepherd does not gather his flock together only to keep us cloistered within these four walls. He leads us out through the door and into the world. While this may seem like a daunting step to take, we can have confidence that the Good Shepherd leads us.

**2. Following the Good Shepherd: *Knowing his Voice***

Following the Good Shepherd into the world begins with *knowing his voice*. While the thief and the robber attempt to sneak into the sheep pen, the Good Shepherd enters through the gate because the gatekeeper recognizes him (10:2-3). His sheep also recognize him. They “recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (10:3). This image of the shepherd and his sheep vividly illustrates the close relationship between Jesus and the Christian. Jesus knows us personally for *he calls each one of us by name*. In Palestine the shepherds frequently have pet names for their favorite sheep, such as “Long-ears” or “White-nose” (Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII,* p. 385). Now I don’t know if Jesus has a pet name for me, but the point is that he lovingly calls us by name and we hear and recognize his voice and come to him. Then, he leads us out. So, his guidance in our lives and in the church is grounded in a deep relationship based on hearing and recognizing his voice.

Since we *know* the Good Shepherd, we can *trust* him as he leads us to venture outside the safety of the sheep pen. When the Good Shepherd brings us, his *own flock*, out of the sheep pen, he goes ahead of us, and we, his sheep, follow him because we know his voice (10:4). So, recognizing and listening to the Good Shepherd’s voice is crucial for following him. Certainly, there is a lot of other noise in our lives that tends to drown out his voice and capture our attention. Yet Jesus’ sheep know his voice, so much so that they refuse to follow other unfamiliar voices that try to lure them away (10:5). How, then, do we become attuned to the Good Shepherd’s voice?

It is through Scripture and prayer. Yet, we must be attentive as to *how* we read Scripture and pray. Often these activities become a quick chore that we do to add a check mark to our spiritual to-do list. We need to recognize that these are holy acts that bring us into the presence of God, which focus our minds and hearts on his voice.

Many times, we zip through our Bible reading, thinking that *quantity* is better than *quality*. Devotional writer and Christian mystic, Madame Guyon (1648-1717) advised Christians to slow down and “pray the Scripture.” She describes this way of Bible reading as follows:

“Turn to the Scripture; choose some passage that is simple and fairly practical. Next, come to the Lord. Come quietly and humbly. There, before him, read a small portion of the passage of Scripture you have opened to. Be careful as you read. Take in fully, gently, and carefully what you are reading. Taste it and digest it as you read. In the past it may have been your habit, while reading, to move very quickly from one verse of Scripture to another until you have read the whole passage. Perhaps you were seeking to find the main point of the passage. But in coming to the Lord by means of “praying the Scripture,” you do not read quickly; you read very slowly. You do not move from one passage to another until you have *sensed* the very heart of what you have read. You may then want to take that portion of Scripture that has touched you and turn it into prayer. “Praying the Scripture” is not judged by *how much* you read but the *way* you read. If you read quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower. Instead, in this new way of reading with prayer, you become as the bee who penetrates into the *depths* of the flower. You plunge deeply within to remove its deepest nectar” (Foster & Smith, *Devotional Classics,* pp. 320-21).

When it comes to prayer, our tendency is to do all the talking. Certainly, God invites us to make our prayer requests known to him, but there is also a time to *be still* before God and listen for his still small voice (1 Kings 19:9-13). Henri Nouwen recognized that “our worried, over-filled lives” creates an environment that surrounds us with so much outer noise “that is it hard to truly hear our God when he is speaking to us.” The result is that we are *deaf*, “unable to know when God calls us and unable to understand in which direction he calls us.” To remedy this situation, Nouwen notes, “we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear.” We do this by practicing *solitude.* According to Nouwen, “Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists but also that he is actively present in our lives – healing, teaching, an guiding – we need to set aside a time and a space to give him undivided attention. Jesus says, ‘Go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to the Father who is in that secret place’ (Matthew 6:6).” Solitude creates an environment that will move us “from the noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to our God and follow his guidance” (Foster & Smith, *Devotional Classics,* p. 95).

Jesus exemplified this spiritual practice in his life. After a busy and hectic period of ministry, Jesus got up “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark,” and he “left the house and went off to a *solitary* place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). When Peter and the others finally found Jesus, they told him of the villager’s expectations, saying, “Everyone is looking for you” (Mark 1:36-37). But undaunted by the crowds’ demands, he was filled with a sense of purpose and mission, declaring, “We must go on to *other* towns as well, and I will preach to them, too. *That is why I came*” (Mark 1:38-39). Jesus’ commitment to the Father’s mission emerged from these solitary times of listening prayer. As a result, he was able to discern the will of the Father amidst the demands of others.

These spiritual practices of prayerfully reading Scripture and listening prayer are more than just items on a spiritual to-do list. They require a commitment of time, the mind and the heart. But the goal is the greatest thing of all – to *know* God more deeply. Relationships with others require commitment and sacrifice. If you really want to get to know someone you’ll spend time with that person, listening to his or her voice, rather than being focused on yourself. Following the Good Shepherd entails getting to know him. Getting to know the Good Shepherd entails listening and responding to his voice. The sheep have an intimate relationship with the Good Shepherd. Jesus declares, “I am the good shepherd; *I know my own sheep*, and *they know me*,just as my Father knows me and I know the Father” (10:14-15).

**3. Following the Good Shepherd: *Protected from the Wolves***

When we know the voice of the Good Shepherd, we willingly follow him where he leads us. Jesus said, “After the shepherd has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice” (10:4). The Good Shepherd leads us in and out of the sheep pen and we find pastures (10:9). Jesus declared, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*” (10:10). Jesus, our Good Shepherd, guides us, his sheep, to green pastures and gives us abundant life. While it is a challenge to let go of our lives and follow Jesus completely, we can trust the Good Shepherd because he is good.

I suspect that when Jesus was talking about the Good Shepherd, he was reflecting on Psalm 23, that beautiful Psalm of *trust*. The image of God as our Shepherd evokes a deep sense of *trust* within us because we know that he is leading us to green pastures and quiet waters. We know that he restores our soul when we are weary. We know that he’s leading us on the right paths.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
    He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
    he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
    for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:1-3)

This is the voice of the Good Shepherd. It’s not a harsh voice that frightens us into submission. His voice lovingly invites us to follow him on the right paths to green pastures and quiet waters. The Good Shepherd doesn’t stand behind the flock and drive the sheep down the path by whacking them with his shepherd’s staff. He calls us by name and walks ahead of us, bidding us to follow his lead. It’s up to us to hear his voice and to trust and obey.

While the road outside the sheep pen leads to green pastures and quiet waters, there is also great danger. When Jesus sent the twelve out to do ministry, he declared, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves” (Matthew 10:16). He then warned them that they would encounter all kinds of persecution and that they would be hated because of him (Matthew 10:22). Jesus didn’t promise his disciples that they would be cloistered from world’s hatred. No, he sent them out like sheep among the wolves. Yet, he did promise them support and help amidst the dangers. If they were arrested and put on trial for their faith, the Holy Spirit would give them the right words to say (Matthew 10:19-20). Jesus urged them not to be fearful of the ones who oppose them because they could have confidence in the Father’s care. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?” Jesus asked them, “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. *And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered*. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31).

While Psalm 23 assures us that the Good Shepherd leads us to green pastures and quiet waters, it also acknowledges that the perils on the path:

“Even when the way goes through  
    Death Valley,  
I’m not afraid  
    when you walk at my side.  
Your trusty shepherd’s crook  
    makes me feel secure” (Psalm 23:4)

Even in the valley of the shadow of death, the sheep do not walk in fear because the shepherd walks beside them. Even in the presence of the enemy, the Lord sets out a six-course meal for us and treats us as the guest of honour by anointing our head with oil (Psalm 23:5).

When the wolves surround the flock and other protectors flee in the face of danger, the Good Shepherd stands his ground and puts his life on the line for the sheep (John 10:11-13). Because we belong to the Good Shepherd, he cares for us and lays down his life for us. God’s goodness and steadfast love pursue us all the days of our lives (Psalm 23:6), even when we are walking in the darkest of valleys. So, we can trust the Good Shepherd and follow his leading.

The challenge for us, as individuals and as a congregation is to learn to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and then to follow him. Even though we may have fears and hesitations about where the road may take us, we can trust the Good Shepherd completely. As a congregation we need to collectively discern the voice of the Good Shepherd and together, follow his leading. The Donway Dialogues that David and Grace facilitated a few weeks ago were a positive start to this process. We might also explore other activities such as discernment/ visioning times or prayer retreats where we gather together to listen to consider, prayerfully, God’s direction. But there is a challenge here: once we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, we must obey and follow.

My friend and mentor, Kevin Quast wrote the following in his book on John’s Gospel:

“To this day in the Middle East, the shepherd walks ahead of the flock, calling the sheep on with his voice, rather than driving them from behind as in Western culture. The picture, then, is an appropriate illustration of the relationship between master and disciple. For the sheep to experience the life the good shepherd provides, they must listen for his voice and follow him. For Jesus’ sheep, following involves listening, understanding, believing, and depending upon Jesus” (*Reading the Gospel of John,* p. 81).

May each one of us hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and may he grant us the strength and the confidence to follow his leading.

**Suggested Responses: Listening to the Good Shepherd**

1. *Listening to God in Scripture*: This week set aside fifteen minutes to “pray the Scripture.” Using Madame Guyon’s approach, remember to:

• Choose a simple passage

• Read it slowly

• Try to sense the heart of each verse before moving on

• When something strikes you as particularly meaningful, turn it to prayer

2. *Listening to God in Quietness and Solitude:* Get up early next Sunday and go to the sanctuary for a time of solitude before worship. Spend some time before service listening to God.