

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2012  
John 10: 11-16  
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

"I am the Good Shepherd." Jesus says. Now, shepherds and sheep are not common sites for most urban dwellers, but all of us probably carry an abiding image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I remember a specific painting I knew as a child and of course since my first church was called Good Shepherd, I received several Jesus as the Good shepherd in everything from icons to statuettes.

Typically these images features Jesus as the kind and gentle shepherd cradling a wayward sheep in his arms or across his shoulders as he returns it to safety. When I was a child I found this to be a very soft and comforting image. As I grew up and began to put away childish things, I began to understand the image of the Good Shepherd in a whole new way.

Gone was the image in my minds eyes of Jesus in his soft pink cloak cradling the fuzzy little lamb. I pictured the sometimes dry and dangerous landscape of adult life and gave thanks that this Jesus, this Good Shepherd of ours, is the one who guides and guards us around life's jagged rocks, hungry wolves, and steep cliffs.

The countryside around Jerusalem from which Jesus would have drawn his images was arid and often hazardous. The rocky soil was a haven for hungry wolves and a trap for unsteady sheep grazing near cliffs that dropped off sharply into the Dead Sea below.

Good shepherds were vigilant, courageous, tender, and tough. Most important of all, the shepherd had to intentionally work at *knowing* his sheep, and making sure that they knew him. The shepherd's voice is what shaped, nurtured, and protected the flock. It was the shepherd's voice that drew the lost, the scared, and the wounded back home.<sup>1</sup> Jesus tells us that he is the shepherd and *his* sheep will listen to *his* voice.

We all grow up with a variety of voices which shape our lives. Like the Good Shepherd, our parents, grandparents, godparents, teachers, and favorite neighbors have "tended" us—they have touched us, taught us, led and comforted us. They have mentored us and shown us that we matter, and they have prepared us for life.

Amid life's steep cliffs and rocky soil many of them have even pointed us to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. All of them have given us the particular gifts of memory and presence—the gifts of caring for us in ways that affirmed us and reminded us just who and whose we are.

Those who truly care for us always want what is best for us. They cry with us when our hearts are broken, they are not afraid to tell us difficult truths when we've lost our way and they are willing to stand as a bulwark between us and present danger if they see that we are at risk.

Being loved in this way the effect of "calling us home." Love of this kind does not spare us from the fact that our choices in life have consequences. Not just for us, but for our entire community.

Growing up in the south we learned that as we grow we are understood as a reflection of the values and character of those who tended and raised us. I know when my mother was particularly upset with my behavior she would say: "I know I did not raise you to act like that!" What kind of things did you hear?

While it doesn't always feel like it at the time, the intent of words like these is to remind us that we are important, that people care about us and that our lives have significance. Those who love us the most will teach us that there is accountability for the choices we make with our lives.

The voices that called our names or called us out of whatever trouble we had gotten ourselves into are never forgotten. I know in the years since my mother's death---and it will be 11 years on May 11th---- she still has not lost the power to nag me---I mean guide me--- even as she sits in the company of saints.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan R. Andrews in "Lectionary Homiletics"

Just the other day I was cooking and as usual I was rushing. I had the heat too high and I just about scorched what was in the pan. And I heard my mom telling me once again that the few minutes I save by trying to move too fast I will lose in having to clean up what I ruin by being in such a hurry.

Okay Mom, okay, you were right about that and right about so, so many things. You were especially right when you told me that God loved me and that nothing in this world could ever change that.

Whoever our shepherds in this life have been, remembering their voices and their power to compel us over the expanse of space and time and even over the threshold of death helps us to *just* begin to grasp what it means for Jesus Christ to shepherd us.

The Good Shepherd's voice is inviting, compelling, affirming, and convicting. This is the voice that issues straight from the heart of God. Jesus tells us: "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father."

When Jesus tells us he is the *Good* Shepherd he is telling us that he is no mere hired hand. Jesus guards the sheep with his very life because he knows them to be his very own. Jesus knows his sheep, Jesus knows us. We are Jesus' own because he shares his heart with us. He doesn't simply give us his affections when he gives us his heart; he becomes the very source of our own lives. Jesus invites us into a relationship where we can share his essential nature.

If we recognize Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the true shepherd, by the tender care he gives his sheep, we can begin to recognize Jesus' sheep in the care and concern they show to the world around them. As Jesus' sheep we are called to a deep and steadfast relationship with one another, the stranger on the street, and with all of God's creation.

As sheep of Jesus' fold, we are called to cherish what Jesus cherishes. In the community of faith we cannot know God or ourselves without truly knowing one another. It's not about simply knowing where someone lives or where he or she went to school, but knowing them truly and deeply as another of God's beloved.

This kind of knowing is about being vulnerable to one another and compassionate to the world around us. And this kind of vulnerability takes a tremendous amount of courage. We are Jesus' sheep when we value the life of another as much or more as we value our own.

Life is messy and complicated, this is the truth. And it may seem counter-intuitive and it is certainly counter-cultural, but the way through the messy complications in life is to share them with one another. We are meant to be the voice of the Good Shepherd to one another when we see members of our faith community in perilous situations.

But how do we recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd amid the clamor of our daily lives? How do we recognize God's voice calling us back as we stumble through our own jagged rocks, steep cliffs, and hungry wolves?

The Good Shepherd's voice will be the one that comforts and restores. We can be sure that the Good Shepherd does not drag us, accuse us, threaten us or violate us to bend us to his will when we go astray. And there is nowhere in creation that we can become so lost that God cannot find us and call us home.

We will know this voice because it will be the one that empowers us, nurtures us, and gives us the freedom to grow toward wholeness. This is God's gift to us--and as those who love God we are invited to share this gift with one another and with the world.

This voice of love comes to us---wherever we are---and calls us by name. Jesus calls us into a life of love and abundance with God, and desires nothing more than that we may hear his voice and enter into that abundant life. Not a life free of peril, danger, or pain, but a life lived without fear and measured by endless grace.

And we always have a choice. Will we listen for his voice or will we surrender to the madness. The Good News is that Christ calls endlessly, everyday, and will continue to call to us for an eternity. AMEN.

In the Name of God, Father Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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