

3 Easter – Year C
Acts 9:36-43
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

This is Good Shepherd Sunday – the Fourth Sunday of our Eastertide celebration of Jesus' Resurrection. We are just about halfway to the Feast of Pentecost, which occurs on the fiftieth day after Easter. We're now in the party-time of the Church, fifty days of celebration that should undo any lingering regrets about the chocolate you didn't eat in Lent! If you have not yet begun your Easter discipline of daily celebration, don't worry. You still have four weeks left!

Good Shepherd Sunday. What does that mean to you? How do you visualize Jesus as "the Good Shepherd?" For many of us, it is that Victorian picture of the wavy-haired, mild-eyed guy with a lamb over his shoulders gently smiling at us. Or perhaps you can visualize him behind the flock, knocking the sheep that stray from the path with his rod and his staff, rather like a border collie nipping at their heels.

Here's the problem. We've got the wrong picture. Traditional middle-eastern shepherds of Jesus' time led their flocks. I mean they walked out in front of them, and if the sheep wanted to eat that day, they quickly learned to follow their shepherd. Hungry and bleating, they knew their shepherd's voice. Their shepherd led them through the village to a pasture – a place where the sheep could eat and make their empty bellies full.

We have images from our movies about herding from the rear, with coercion. The sheep of Jesus' time knew in the core of their being that their shepherd would find them food: "I shall not be in want." They knew that when they were tired of scrambling

after him up rocky slopes, that he would “make me lie down in green pastures” and not force them to ford dangerous streams to find food, but “lead me beside still waters.” They understood that following a Good Shepherd was the way to a good life.

The person we need to understand in all Jesus’ references to his being a shepherd, is not wimpy Jesus. He does not stand around gazing while his sheep are hungry. This is a guy who is climbing up the steep slopes, watching for the green pastures, because he knows that his flock knows his voice and will follow where he leads. They trust him. He knows each one. So as he strides on ahead, he encourages them, calling them. And they know that he will protect them from unexpected evil. What if they meet predators –who love to eat nice rich sheep–around the next bend? Oh! “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

When Jesus says: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” he was not making some nice comment about a docile little Mary-had-a-little-lamb. He knows very well how much the forces of evil want his nice fat sheep. He is talking about the fact that he will defend against ultimate evil those who are his. Jesus is not a wimp. He means it.

This is the man in our gospels who looked at Peter, Andrew, James, Levi and so many others. And he simply said “Follow me!” His words touched some place inside themselves so deep, that they could not imagine doing anything else. They followed him.

This is the Jesus who spoke to Saul of Tarsus. He spoke to Francesco of Assisi. He spoke to Teresa of Avila. And when they heard him, their lives were changed forever. They followed him.

Even in our modern era, Jesus speaks. In the mid-20th century, Simone Weil, a French woman of Jewish extraction, an agnostic, heard the voice of Jesus, and followed him. She knew the voice of Jesus. She was very, very sure who was speaking to her.

I suspect that if we ourselves ever hear the voice of Jesus directly, we also will follow him as so many others have, no matter where the path leads. For most of us, that voice comes through our clergy, our families and friends. It is the persistent voice of calling and yearning that makes us wake up at 3 or 4 in the morning, knowing, knowing that the Lord wants us to do something. We know that Jesus is asking us to follow him up the mountain, to the high place of love. And Jesus says that what God has given him, he will not lose.

Richard Bauckham, a New Testament scholar, says that this chapter of John's gospel shows us that God's hold on us is much more reliable than our hold on God.

So when Jesus calls our name, deep in our souls, how does that voice get there? How do we become the sheep who know their shepherd's voice? Most of us have never actively heard a voice speaking in our souls that we know, without question, is Jesus. Yet at the same time, many of us have had the spiritual gift of a certainty, a solid place, a place to rest that is not grounded in money, or power, or celebrity, but is a calling to the life of love. It is the voice of Jesus.

You see, he has bequeathed us the gift of baptism.

I heard a sad story this week. A Christian father wants his two children baptized. Their mother, who was raised without the gift of faith, wants to wait until the children are "old enough to understand what is happening." The priest who told us the story just

shook his head and laughed softly: “I told him I still don’t understand all of what is happening in baptism.”

Who could? Who can understand the blessed mystery that makes us known to God, pledged to God and not to evil? Who can begin to comprehend the enormous gift of being “marked as Christ’s own, forever?” Our own true names are given to Jesus. Jesus knows our names. IN the name of Jesus, we are safe from the ravening evil that eats people’s souls.

This is no small thing. Jesus makes it very clear in John’s gospel how he feels about those souls who have been given to him, to be his flock. He will protect each and every one: “No one will snatch it out of my hand.”

See how much he values your soul! “What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

*“You spread a table before me in the presence
of those who trouble me;
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.
Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

Amen.