

April 30, 2023
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Year A
John 10:1-10
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Smart Sheep

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter. It's known in the church year as Good Shepherd Sunday. At least that's how it's known by dignified people and pastors. As for me, I call it Sheepie Sunday. It's the Sunday when we explore, over the course of the three-year lectionary cycle, most of the 10th chapter of the gospel of John, which is where Jesus talks about sheep, tells us that he is the gate, tells us that he is the Good Shepherd, tells us that the sheep hear and know his voice, and tells us that he and the Father are one. The assigned Psalm for this Sunday, is always Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want."

I have to say, Sheepie Sunday is not one of my favorite Sundays in the church year, not because I have anything against the 10th chapter of John, not because I have anything against the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and not because I have anything against Psalm 23, in fact it has grown on me over the years.

My problem with Sheepie Sunday is that it is the Sunday in the Easter season when we stop talking about how Jesus interacted with his disciples after his resurrection.

On Easter Day, of course, we talk about Jesus' resurrection, the women going to the tomb, finding it empty, sometimes talking to angels, and spreading the news to Jesus' disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead. On the Sunday after Easter Day, the Second Sunday of Easter, we always have the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples and offering them his peace, and then appearing to Thomas. On the Third Sunday of Easter which we celebrated last Sunday, we always have a story about the resurrected Jesus sharing a meal with his disciples. Last week

it was the story of Jesus walking on the road to Emmaus with two of his disciples and then being made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

But on this Sunday, that ends. We stop talking about appearances of the resurrected Jesus and move back in time to before Jesus' resurrection, and hear him giving words of support and encouragement to his disciples and followers so that they will have joy and peace and confidence, and be prepared for the Holy Spirit.

The gospel readings for the rest of the Easter season are good ones, meaningful and inspiring, but still, they feel less "Easter-y" than the readings for the first three Sundays of Easter, when Jesus keeps appearing; surprising his disciples in their locked rooms, when they try to go back to work, on their roads, and around their dinner tables.

For the next few weeks, in our Easter season gospel readings, we will be hearing more about how to walk by faith and not by sight; how to experience Jesus' presence in the world and in our lives, even when we can't see him or touch him, in the same way that his first disciples could immediately after his resurrection.

It's still the Easter season, but I still feel like on this Sunday, we're moving a little bit farther away from Easter joys and alleluias, we're moving a little bit closer to ordinary time

So, I always greet Sheepie Sunday with a little bit of regret, not for what it is, but for what it feels like we're leaving behind.

Still, this year, I looked forward to Sheepie Sunday more than I usually do. Because in a way, I started writing this sermon on December 22nd of last year, when I spent some time with the sheep of Gore Place in preparation for worship on Christmas Eve.

If I had been completely the mistress of my own destiny, I would have gone back to Gore Place for this Sunday, in better and more appropriate boots than the ones that I wore when I went at Christmastime. I would have memorized the gospel for this Sunday and gone back to visit the sheep and recited the gospel reading, by

the sheep gate and surrounded by the baaing sheep, for our Zoom service, to give the service and the gospel reading a bit of on location reality.

Instead, I spent most of the week before last sick, and then I traveled to Susquehanna to see Abigail in a play, getting back only just in time to preach for worship last Sunday. This past week has been spent playing catch up and still getting over a cough and a scratchy throat. There was no time to memorize the gospel or to feel confident that I would be able to get through a memorized gospel reading without getting hoarse or having a coughing fit. I had no confidence, that, with my voice, which is scratchy and unreliable right now, I would be able to make myself heard over the baaing of the sheep.

But I remember. I remember the sheep of Gore place and what I learned from them at Christmastime.

And what I remember, the thing that I learned from them that was most important, was that sheep don't like strangers. I remember thinking, even at the time, that my time with the sheep was giving me an even better Sheepie Sunday sermon than they were a Christmas Eve sermon. Because when I crossed the gate, when I entered their enclosure, their fields, those sheep took off. Those sheep ran.

I mean, come on. I'm a pretty nice person. I've never done anything to a sheep. I'm even a vegetarian. A sheep has nothing to fear from me.

It didn't matter. They didn't stick around to see if I was a nice person, friendly, calm, quiet. They knew what they needed to know. I was a stranger and they wanted nothing to do with me.

I think that it would probably have been worse if I'd gone back to the sheep this week. Susan Robertson, a member of our congregation and Gore Place's executive director, has been filling us in on the sheep during prayer group. The sheep have lambed, which means that, the sheep that were so leery of me the last time I was there, now have the additional responsibility of looking after their babies,

their little lambs. Imagine how thrilled they'd be to have me, a stranger, climbing into their pasture, their protected space, near their babies.

Now, in this case, my experience differed from what Jesus describes in our gospel reading for today. Obviously, I had permission to go and stand in the sheep's pasture.

Jesus said in our gospel reading, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep."

(John 10:1-2)

But of course, when I went into the sheep's pasture, I went in through the gate. You would have thought that the sheep would have loved me. But it didn't matter. How I got in didn't matter. What mattered to the sheep was that I was a stranger. The sheep heard my voice and it wasn't the voice they were looking for.

The farmer, on the other hand, well, he was another story. He did what he could to get the sheep into the picture, into the video that I was making. When I, the stranger, entered into the pasture, the sheep took off, ran away, to get away from me, but the farmer, their shepherd, who had cared for them since they had come to the farm, who had helped them birth their lambs, who had bottle fed some of them since they were babies, who fed them hay and led them to pasture, they listened to him. They trusted him.

He even got them to come back to me, at least a little closer, so that they weren't hiding behind trees or across the little brook that ran through their fields. He got them to come a little bit closer, from where they had run when they first saw me coming, at least close enough that they were in the picture for the video that we were making. But no one, who knew anything about sheep would have believed that I was a shepherd. The sheep clearly didn't know me at all. The shepherd, though, they knew him. They trusted him, even enough to do something

that went against their instincts, to run and hide from me, a stranger, perhaps a threat.

Every year, on Sheepie Sunday, I feel like I learn something about sheep. This year, what I learned, I learned way before Sheepie Sunday, but even then, I knew that I was seeing Jesus' words in our gospel reading for today play out, right before my eyes. This year I learned that, in some ways, sheep are smarter than people. Because it is true, that the sheep shy away from strangers. And it is true that sheep know the voice of their shepherd and they listen to him.

Of course, our gospel reading for today is not really about sheep. It's really about people. It's a metaphor, using the images of sheep and shepherds, Jesus is saying that the people who make up his community listen to his voice and they know him. They can discern his voice from others that are competing for their attention and they know to follow Jesus and not to get distracted from their shepherd.

The problem is while that might be true of sheep, it's less true of people. We really do get distracted, all too easily. We sometimes chase after things that will not lead us in the way of abundant life. We frequently listen to other voices. We seek wisdom that is not God's wisdom. We do not eat the good pasture that Jesus sets before us. Instead, we seek other foods, the food that does not satisfy.

The ideal is that the sheep will know the shepherd and be faithful to him. But when the sheep are actually people, the reality is that we are prone to stray, prone to wandering, and not really good at identifying the thieves and bandits who will lead us away from God. Sometimes we even make up imaginary threats and miss the real ones that are right in front of us, the very real dangers that can lead us away from Jesus.

In spite of Jesus' metaphor, there are a lot of things that people and sheep actually do not have in common. But here's one thing that they do have in common. Sheep, who actually do listen to their shepherd's voice. They really do

have shepherds, usually good shepherds, who will try to lead them to good pasture and help them to identify the difference between real threats and nice, friendly, innocent pastors who are just trying to do an on-location video for Christmas Eve worship.

We, who are not sheep, but people, also have a good shepherd; a shepherd who will never leave us or abandon us, even when we don't listen to his voice, even when we seem to prefer thieves and bandits over the Lord who loves us, watches over us, and leads us, even when we struggle to follow. We might stray, but Jesus doesn't. Jesus comes that we may have life and have it abundantly, and no one will snatch us out of his hand.

And that Jesus, who spoke these words before his crucifixion, who promised to be our Good Shepherd, is still with us today. He lives, our resurrected Lord. And it is still the Easter season, so, let us say with joy that Alleluia, our Good Shepherd, Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!