

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 22, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:10b-18

Life in the Flock

Just outside of Bethlehem is a place called “The Shepherd’s Field.” It is the spot where, tradition says, the shepherds watched their flocks the night Jesus was born. Rolling bare hills surround the fields; stone walls divide the land. Some of the fields have old stone buildings on them. Flocks of sheep and goats dot the landscape.

But that is a pastoral setting worlds away from busy America with our noisy car-filled streets and machine-filled lives. When we do see farms with perhaps a flock of sheep, even that lovely scene is a far cry from the Middle East during biblical times.

Then and there, sheep were all over the countryside. In fact there are more than 500 references to sheep in the Bible; because you see, the sheep business was a pillar of Israel’s economy, providing the wealth and livelihood for so many. Sheep in the fields meant food to eat, milk to drink, wool for making cloth and tents. Jesus’ world was full of sheep and shepherds and so he talked about them a lot.

Once he told a story about a shepherd who lost a lamb and spent all night looking for it. What a wonderful picture of God and the Kingdom of his Son. And in our scripture today, Jesus says he is “The Good Shepherd” - an image of Jesus loved by Christians around the world and through the ages. Jesus holding a lamb, fills hundreds of stained glass windows in churches and many children’s Sunday School books.

And that tender picture is fleshed out in everyone’s favorite Psalm, the 23rd. What wonderful and familiar words: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....” for so many a comforting, sustaining image. We read it at funerals and in the hospital. We cling to it in our darkest hours, and we will sing it after the sermon this morning.

Truly, He restores my soul....Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for God is with me; His rod and staff they comfort me.

But we need to look carefully at this Shepherd. The stained glass window and children’s books don’t tell the whole story. This is not merely tender, nor even sentimental. Psalm 23 goes far wider and deeper than lambs in the arms of a kindly shepherd.

Sheep herding was a tough job and required someone up to the task. King David was a shepherd before he was King of Israel. So don’t let his 23rd Psalm fool you; he was one tough character.

Remember, when he was a teenager, he volunteered to take on the warrior Goliath. He was sure he could whip a professional soldier, while King Saul was quite certain this amateur, this boy, would not be able to take on the giant Goliath. But David reminded Saul that he was a shepherd. He’d taken on lions and bears and killed them with his bare hands.

Because shepherds have to be strong and brave. You can’t spend too much of your time petting little lambs in your arms when predators are on the loose.

In the valley of the shadow of death, when the predators threaten life itself, David fears no evil, because his shepherd is with him. *His rod and staff comfort me.* Which, by the way, are the weapons of the

shepherd. The gravest danger, the most frightening moment, is eased because the shepherd isn't just there, but has the weapons in hand, needed to protect us.

We need to be sure to make the shepherd in the stained glass window strong enough to save and bold enough to protect.

People in the world of the Bible understood that. Kings, in fact, were often called "shepherds," because their job was to protect the people in their care and to lead them. Interestingly, in Psalm 23, the king is not our shepherd. God is the shepherd of Israel.

However, in the New Testament, Jesus is now the shepherd. Jesus leads, protects and cares for his flock, the church. Only once in the entire New Testament is a leader in the church referred to as "shepherd," the English word "pastor," and that is with the qualifying word "teacher" added (Eph. 4:11). The shepherd image is reserved for Christ, the Lord of the Church, who is the one who is truly capable of shepherding his church.

I am the good shepherd, he says. I know my sheep and my sheep know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:11, 14-15).

God knows we need a shepherd, because life itself is at stake. Just as sheep need a shepherd to survive; God made us with a deep need for Him in our lives as well.

Because the truth is, there is a lot to be afraid of.

It might be a transition in life, the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, loss of ability or memory, not being included in a friend group, the prospect of being alone. Our fears may change as we move through life, but the fact and presence of fear in our lives does not.

And this true not only of individuals. Think of those fears we are experiencing as a church: Are we reaching new people? The budget is tight. We've lost cultural influence and respect.

Or the fears we face as a culture and country: the end of upward mobility, a lack of cultural cohesion, fear of strangers, loss of status in the world. These fears drive our decisions, influence elections, and weigh on us incessantly. These fears, in short, rob us of abundant life.

Because abundant life is not a quantitative statement – having more, even lots more, of what we already have – but rather a qualitative distinction. Life in abundance is life that is no longer dominated by fear, but rather lives in and through the promise of protection and presence.

We need the Good Shepherd in our world and in our souls - strong enough to fix our broken lives and transform communities. The one in the stained glass window and the children's books is not enough. Jesus is not about petting sweet little lambs. He is about changing lives and cultures. And to do this we need a Good Shepherd who loves us enough to lay down his own life.

Another interesting thing to notice is that he doesn't speak of a single lamb. This isn't just about individuals. Jesus talks about his flock; it's always his sheep in the plural. And even more, it's only one flock, not many. Even when he talks about going to other sheep pens, it is in order to bring them to the one flock.

The Good Shepherd has millions and billions of sheep in his care – all at the same time even! And it is safe - there in Jesus' flock. A few verses later, Jesus says that no one can snatch his sheep from his hand because his father's hand is over his hand, as even more protection (John 10:28-29).

Real life, abundant life, life to the full, is life in the flock, and it is meant to be a shared life. That's why the Christian life in the New Testament is inconceivable apart from the church.

And this is still no pretty Sunday School picture book, because sheep pens can be pretty messy and sheep can spend a lot of time making a lot of noise. But remember, there is no sheep life without the flock. And there is no flock with out the Good Shepherd leading and protecting us, holding the whole mess of us in his arms.

Also, there is enormous strength and healing in flocks. And God made us that way. Families were the norm from the beginning. Sure they can get messy, but they are necessary. That's life in the flock - it is natural and it is necessary.

The Chosen People of God were also like that - a people, lots and lots of them with lots and lots of problems. In fact, Moses was spending so much time listening to their troubles he had to hire assistants. In fact, half of the Ten Commandments are how to treat people in the flock.

And then Jesus - he called together a group of disciples - an inner circle of 12, and a larger crowd of more than 100. And their life was communal as well, because people need a flock as well as a shepherd.

It seems we know that instinctively. Most of us prefer to do things with others. We need and make friends. We like group activities. We long for someone with whom to share our life.

Flock life is not some abstract ideal, some invisible church out there where everybody smiles and nobody hurts. It is flesh and blood people. It is as simple as friends and as deep as changed lives. And it can be a challenge.

There is a photo on the wall of my office which is a moment in a larger scene in which a shepherd is taking his flock from one mountainside to another. In between is a swift, cold mountain river with a rocky shore and bottom. The shepherd leads the sheep to the edge and they do not want to go in. So what he does is take them one by one and helps them into the river. And then once the last one is in, he himself steps into the cold rocky river and walks through it so that he can lead them on the other side.

We have a Good Shepherd who leads us to pastures of abundant life, who protects us from harm, who carries us when we're hurt and broken, and leads us to safety. And our Good Shepherd is THE Good Shepherd because he does this by laying down his life for us. What we need to do is listen for his voice, follow his lead, and live in his love.

Abundant life is yours - is ours! You know I like to say that Easter isn't simply a one-time celebration or holiday, but a season. Well, it's even more than that. It is a way of life, a life guided by the promise that there is something "More" than what we see, buy, collect, or hoard.

Life, like love, is one of those things that, in the power of God's Spirit, only multiplies as it is shared. And as love and life are shared, fear loses its grip on us and we taste, even revel in, not just life, but life in its abundance.

Amen.