

First Trinity Lutheran Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 13, 2008

Do You Know the Shepherd?

Two men were called on, in a large classroom, to recite the Twenty-third Psalm. One was an orator trained in speech technique and drama. He repeated the psalm in a powerful way. When he finished, the audience cheered and asked for an encore that they might hear his wonderful voice again. Then the other man repeated the same words--'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...' but when he finished, no sound came from the class. Instead, people sat in a mood of deep devotion and prayer. Then the first man stood to his feet. "I have a confession to make," he said. "The difference between what you have just heard from my friend, and what you heard from me is this: I know the words of Psalm and I have professionally trained voice, but my friend knows the Shepherd."

John in his Gospel uses many images but here in this text John uses the image of Jesus as a shepherd. Like a shepherd, Jesus is concerned with the welfare and the care of His sheep. The shepherd loves his sheep. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. He didn't call himself King Jesus...He didn't call himself President Jesus...He didn't call himself Commissioner Jesus...He didn't call himself Mayor Jesus...Doctor Jesus...Reverend Jesus...Deacon Jesus...Or Chairman Jesus....But he called himself a shepherd...A servant...A caretaker...A watchmen...A provider...He called himself a shepherd... We are God's people and the sheep of his pasture... We depend on God, for everything...and just as a shepherd watches over his sheep...so does God watch over his people...

Two caretakers are mentioned in this account further on in verses 11-13, the Good Shepherd, and the hired hand. The hired hand had no connection with the sheep, no relationship with the sheep. He thought of himself first and the sheep last. If a sheep was attacked by a wolf, or lost, oh well. Then there is the good shepherd. The good shepherd is

the owner of the sheep. He has a special relationship with them. Most owners didn't own a lot of sheep. A flock of 100 was huge. Most flocks were no larger than 10-20. Sheep were like valued pets. There was nothing about their sheep that the good shepherd did not know. The individual sheep in a flock all look alike to the untrained eye. A good shepherd, however, can tell them apart--often because of their markings or peculiar traits. Sheep also know the Shepherd voice and face.

We have started an online bible class here at First Trinity and this week some of you have made some very interesting points about this Good Shepherd and sheep analogy. My wife Fran, a midwife, has written that she has been amazed at how babies just a few hours old are drawn to their mothers' faces when held. She has seen how a baby will move its head to the sound of mom's voice. She writes, Does this happen by magic? No way, baby has been slowly imprinting mom's voice while in the womb since 24 weeks of gestation. Day by day mom's heartbeat, laughter and voice are enfolded into the little baby's being. These are the first things baby "remembers" after birth. Kjersten Priddy answers the question how are people like sheep? She says that "Sheep are relational animals and are constantly searching for food Kjersten says well, people are also problem solvers, and I'm pretty food-oriented. Another thing mentioned about sheep is that sheep have good memories will remember an individual human face for years. So when it says the sheep know their shepherd, the sheep really do *know* their shepherd. They can tell their shepherd's face from all the other people." We can add voice as well.

The bond between the Shepherd and the Sheep is illustrated though this court case. A man in Australia was arrested and charged with stealing a sheep. But he vigorously protested that it was one of his own that had been missing for many days. When the case went to court, the judge didn't know how to decide the matter. Finally he asked that the sheep be brought into the courtroom. Then he ordered the plaintiff to step outside and call the animal. The

sheep made no response except to raise its head and look frightened. The judge then instructed the defendant to go to the courtyard and call the sheep. When the accused man began to make his distinctive call, the sheep ran toward the voice. It was obvious that he recognized the familiar voice of his master. "His sheep knows him," said the judge. "Case dismissed!"

Jesus, in John's Gospel, describes the sheep pen. It had only one door. When the sheep returned to the fold at night after a day of grazing in the pleasant pastures, the shepherd stood in the doorway and inspected each one with tender care as it entered. If a sheep was scratched or wounded by thorns, the shepherd would anoint it with oil to facilitate healing. If they were thirsty, he gave them water. After all had been counted and brought into the pen, the shepherd would lay across the doorway so no intruder could enter. The shepherd thus became the door. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who protects and sustains the life of the sheep. Jesus said, "I am the gate for the sheep."

In the book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Eric Butterworth tells the story of a college professor who had his sociology class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories of 200 young boys. The students were asked to write an evaluation of each boy's future. In every case the students wrote, "He hasn't got a chance." Twenty-five years later another sociology professor came across this earlier study. He had his students do follow up on the same 200 boys who were now men. With the exception of 20 boys who had moved away or died, the students learned that 176 of the remaining 180 had achieved more than ordinary success as lawyers, doctors, and businessmen. The professor was astounded and decided to pursue the matter further. Fortunately, all the men were in the area and he was able to ask each one, "How do you account for your success?" In each case the reply came with feeling, "It was our teacher." The teacher was still alive, so he sought her out and asked the old but still alert woman what magic formula she had used to pull these boys out of the slums into successful

achievement. The teacher's eyes sparkled and her lips broke into a gentle smile. "It's really very simple," she said. "I loved those boys." Their success was based on the love of a teacher.

Pastor Wendy has been leading the Wednesday Noon Bible Class on the book A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 by W. Phillip Keller. Keller was born in East Africa who loves the outdoors and wildlife. He also worked as a Shepherd. In the book one of his experiences with a sheep caught my attention. Keller writes, "in spite of having a Shepherd who is caring and loving and will always take care of the sheep, Christians are still not content with God's control. They are somewhat dissatisfied always feeling that somehow the grass beyond the fence must be a little greener. There are carnal Christian, one might call them fence crawlers or half-Christians who want the best of both worlds. I once owned an ewe whose conduct was exactly typified this sort of person. She was one of the most attractive sheep that ever belonged to me. Her body was beautifully proportioned. She had a strong constitution and an excellent coat of wool. Her head was clean, alert, well set with bright eyes. She bore sturdy lambs that matured rapidly. But in spite of all these attractive attributes she had one pronounced fault. She was a restless discontent fence crawler, so much so that I came to call her Mrs. Gadabout. This one ewe produced more problems for me than almost all the rest of the flock combined. No matter what field or pasture the sheep were, she would search all along the fences or shoreline (we lived by the sea) looking for a loophole she could crawl through and start to feed on the other side. It was not that she lacked pasturage. My fields were joy and delight. No sheep in the district had better grazing. With Mrs. Gadabout it was an ingrained habit. She was simple never content with things as they were. Often when she had forced her way through some such spot in a fence or found a way around the end of the wire at low tide on the beaches, she would end up feeding on bare, brown, burned up pasturage of a most inferior sort. But she never learned her lesson and continues to fence

crawl time after time. Now it would have been bad enough if she were the only one who did this. It was a sufficient problem to find her and bring her back. But the further point was that she taught her lambs the same tricks. They simply followed her example and soon were as skilled as escaping as their mother. Even worse, however, was the example she set for the other sheep. In short time she began to lead others through the same holes and over the same dangerous paths down by the sea.”

Our success as followers of Jesus is based on the love of a shepherd who was willing to lay down his life for us. He loved us enough that our sinfulness became his burden. He loved us enough that his perfect rightness became ours. He loved us enough to suffer on the cross for us. To save us from eternal death. To prepare us to meet His Father. He will keep us safe in the sheepfold if we’re smart sheep and follow the Good Shepherd.

Let us Pray. Creator God in Jesus we have a true shepherd. We come together as the sheep of his fold to worship you and give thanks for this great gift. Help us to draw close to you that by your love and our attentive listening we may become so familiar with your voice that we will not be deceived or led astray by any other. Nurture and equip us as faithful leaders and ministers of your gospel according to Christ’s example. Amen

