

The Good Shepherd and the Hired Hand

The Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 25, 2021

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Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away~ and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 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. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." John 10:11-16

"I am the good shepherd," says Jesus.

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This naming of himself by Jesus is one in a series that forms a unique feature of John's gospel. Jesus also says:

"I am the bread of life. (Ch. 6)

"I am the light of the world." (Ch. 8)

"I am the true vine ..." (Ch. 15) and more.

Many of us readily and gratefully know these and other *I am* qualities of Jesus from our devotions. They come alive in us by what we might call an eternal or a resurrection tense: The One who is *I am* has always been, always is, and always intends to *be* – with us. So it is that on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, as we continue to contemplate his resurrection, Jesus speaks to his followers from one generation to another, assuring us, "*I am the good shepherd*."

For the original Jewish hearers, as for many of us, the good shepherd image from today's gospel would have evoked a variety of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, including the 23rd Psalm, also read every year on this same Sunday in many churches.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me

in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.

And then, in addition to this familiarity and delight and guidance, there is also protection, security: "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*"

The 'valley of the shadow of death' is poetic, and yet it conjures up a literal place or places that many of us know. We have been there. The world can be cruel, shame-filled and unsafe. In faith we have recognized, even if only later, that our heavenly and eternal shepherd was there with us.

In the gospel passage, Jesus goes on to contrast the good shepherd with the 'hired hand.' "*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd ... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away ... because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.*"

In this harsh appraisal of the 'hired hand,' the original hearers would have partly heard other well-known Hebrew scriptures, in particular the harsh prophecies from generations past against the misguided, abusive and neglectful 'shepherds of Israel.' Anyone of any faith in any generation may hear a caution about religious and spiritual authority and how it is exercised, and how it can be abused or neglected.

Judging from the words of Jesus and the prophets before him, one might think that we should easily recognize who are good shepherds and who are hired hands. It would sure help if the good shepherds were outfitted with lambswool vests and hired hands were required to wear, say, Green Bay Packer jerseys. But it's rarely that clear, is it? This feature of the teaching is in part a reminder to be vigilant and discerning and to hold accountable those of us who are, arguably, the hired hands.

By way of this good-shepherd-and-hired-hand comparison, Jesus is also clearly making reference to one particular instance of religious authority gone awry. It's the case study that immediately precedes today's passage and takes up all of Chapter 9 in the Gospel of John.

At the start of that story, Jesus comes across a man blind from birth. His disciples ask him, "*Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" We know from the start that this man is an outcast. After Jesus heals the man, a heated drama follows. Now able to see, the man is viciously interrogated by 'the Pharisees.' They are portrayed here as self-appointed and misguided guardians of God. They use the man as a pawn, squeezing him for testimony to fuel their case against Jesus, who had healed the man. The parents of the man are soon dragged into the inquisition. They distance themselves from him, choosing to save themselves.

Though he now sees, for the moment the man remains powerless in the eyes of his community. He is therefore easy prey, a lamb unable to defend himself. The hired hands smugly display their religious power by excommunicating him from their religious life.

But now Jesus returns to the story. In just a few verses we will come to today's teaching in Chapter 10. Jesus will name himself as the good shepherd. And for now: "*Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him ...*"

Let me pause here, to draw attention to this quintessential good shepherd moment. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and he went and found him. The good shepherd characteristically devotes the most attention and his most skilled care to the sheep who are sick or scattered or lost or cast out. This instance is not an isolated incident. So take heart if ever you've been or felt cast out, or if you are wounded, or if you have doubts. The good shepherd already has your case file. The good shepherd has already found you. The good shepherd will devote his compassion and best healing care to you. He will do so even if it peeves the straight and narrow do-gooders and their hired hands.

"Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'" He answered, 'And who is he, sir?' Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord,' I believe.' And he worshipped him."

We hear of the Good Shepherd every year on this fourth Sunday of Easter. We can easily respond to this annual visitation with mere sentimentality. But what if the good shepherd, now and forever resurrected, is coming in search of you or me? In what present and concerning peril might he find us? In what hired hand have we mistakenly relied? Is there some green pasture or still water where he may delight to lead you and offer you rest? Amen.