

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
May 8, 2022
Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

Good Shepherding

A year ago yesterday I announced publicly via social media that I had accepted the call to become the thirty-fourth rector of St Paul's, Key West. It was one of my most liked and most commented upon posts ever.

I accepted the call to St Paul's on April 26, announced it on May 7, and by May 21, Shabbat (that's our dog) and I were here in Key West. It was a bit of a whirlwind for Becky and me and our family.

It felt especially fast-moving because of how different the pace of life had seemed for the previous year. Although the virus that causes COVID-19 moved rapidly, as we took the indicated steps in response to it, we found that many dimensions of our lives slowed way down. We spent much less time driving, much more time at home, and much more time in nature.

And around the one-year mark of pandemic lockdown, in March 2021, we joined with our neighbors in hosting a herd of sheep.

Yes, sheep. A couple dozen of them of varying breeds and colors and sizes and ages came to live in the backyards of five houses on our street and in the common area behind all our properties.

These sheep visitors were employees, you might say, of a neighborhood business called Ewe Can Do It Naturally run by a shepherd named John, a neighbor from a few streets farther over.

Our backyard was the home base where the feeding and watering happened. Over the course of several weeks, we watched the massive undergrowth of those wooded backyards disappear. The sheep ate everything they could reach, and the English ivy and all the other invasive plants that we didn't want went away. The landscape was transformed by the sheep just doing what they do.

Becky and I loved having the sheep there; Shabbat, our pup, not so much. We liked watching them, hearing them, walking among them, interacting with them, even holding and carrying the young ones.

Becky's favorite was an old girl called Tillie who was nearly blind. My favorite was a baby girl called Jalen who was hobbled up by foot rot. There was a lot of lamb love in our lives for those weeks.

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Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year in our three-year cycle of readings in the Revised Common Lectionary, on this Sunday we hear from John's gospel about the Good Shepherd whom we know as Jesus the Christ.

After my close encounters with sheep last year, I hear these readings a bit differently. Sheep are not the smartest of God's creatures. They are pretty **simple** and straightforward in their life and work, and they are pretty simple-minded.

If they find themselves on the opposite side of a fence from the rest of the flock, they really have a hard time figuring how to get back to the other side. They have difficulty retracing their steps.

Sheep are **social**. They thrive as part of a group, and they don't do well in isolation.

Sheep **need supervision**. They need someone looking out for them and warding off predators. They benefit from the watchful presence of a properly trained sheepdog, and they need a shepherd.

Simple, social, in need of supervision: in these ways, we are like sheep. And yet we work very hard to pretend otherwise. It is not always easy for us humans who may or may not be the smartest of God's creatures to figure out how to retrace our steps when we find ourselves separated from everyone else.

In this culture, we are weaned on the myth of self-sufficiency, and yet we are social creatures, interdependent upon God, each other, and Creation. We need community. We do not do well in isolation. As our sister Episcopalian Brené Brown puts it, "We are hardwired for love and belonging."

And we need supervision; literally, over-viewing: not someone bossing us around but someone looking out for us.

Simple, social, in need of supervision. Jesus the Christ, the Good Shepherd, meets our needs by meeting us where we are, by accompanying us, caring for us, and empowering us to accompany and care for one another.

Scripture is filled with shepherds: David, Rachel, Moses, Rebekah; it's a long list of our forebears in life and faith who spent some of their days caring for flocks. In the case of those I've just named and many others, they cared for the flocks that belonged to their family. They were trusted with the care of sheep by their parents as young people. This was customary in biblical times.

By the first century in Palestine, in Jesus' earthly lifetime, shepherding was not always a family enterprise. Hired hands were often in charge of the sheep. And often these hired hands were folks who couldn't get any other work. They tended to be criminals and outcasts. The sheep they tended didn't belong to them or to their families; these shepherds were not so invested in the care of the sheep.

These are the hirelings Jesus refers to elsewhere as the ones who run away in the face of danger, abandoning the sheep. They are bad shepherds in contrast to the good shepherd who will not run away, who will not abandon the sheep, who knows the sheep and cares for them even when walking in the valley of the shadow of death. The good shepherd is the one whose voice is known and trusted by the sheep.

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Very late on Friday, or very, very early on Saturday, depending on how you think about it, I returned on a thrice-delayed flight from my retreat with my clergy accountability group. Since 2015 we have spent the better part of a week together on an annual retreat. In 2020 and 2021 we couldn't gather, but last week, for the first time since 2019, we could. We were able once more to follow Jesus' advice to his disciples in Mark 6:31: "Come away to a lonely place [an uncrowded place] by yourselves and rest a while."

With these trusted companions I can be both sheep and shepherd. We help one another find our way. We experience real community. We look out for one another. Together we are able to distinguish the voice of the Good Shepherd from among all the other competing other voices.

Our life on retreat is a microcosm of our life not on retreat: finding our way, in community, looking out for one another, listening to the voice of the Holy One who calls us each by name. When we pull back from and intentionally place ourselves at a remove from what can easily become too much busyness, it is easier to parse out these basic, critical functions from all the other activity that tends to occupy our time and attention.

In this community each of us is, each of us can be both sheep and shepherd. Who has helped you find your way when you were somehow turned around? Sometime when you have been apparently dead or at least in the shadow of death like Tabitha in the first reading from Acts, who has called you by name and extended their hand to you to help you stand up again as Peter did for Tabitha? When you were feeling isolated and lonely, somehow cut off from community who has reached out to you? When you were in a tender season of grief or new growth, who has looked out for you?

And, in turn, whom in this season are you called now to guide, to accompany, to connect with, to look out for?

What do you need to do, where do you need to go, how do you need to be in order to hear the voice of the One who knows you so well and calls you by your true name?

God help us as followers of the Good Shepherd to flourish as a flock in this place and share the ministry of reconciliation, of shepherding that is committed to our care.