

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (John 10.14)

As we’ve been hearing for the last few weeks, more than anything else Easter is a celebration of our Hope. Jesus’s death and rising again to new life is a confirmation of the power of God and his love for the world through this ultimate sacrifice. It is the hope that no matter where we might have been led into darkness, His light will prevail. It’s this promise – God’s love and grace – that has led to the continued relevance of the Gospel all these years later. The hope that the creator of the world loves it so much that he’d put himself on the line to save it.

It’s this message that we’re hearing over and over today, a day sometimes called “Good Shepherd Sunday” since in the Gospel Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. As you can see on the bulletin cover, from a stained glass window in this church, ‘The Good Shepherd’ has been a constant staple of Christian art for centuries. In fact, the Good Shepherd might just be one of *the earliest* motifs in Christian art dating back two thousand years. But why? Why has this image of the Good Shepherd been so popular and enduring? Like all symbols we encounter, it’s because of the meaning it conveys, and the symbolism behind it – a symbolism our lessons today unravel and expose for us.

We know from the Bible and from archaeological evidence that the Israelites and their ancestors were a *pastoral* people: they kept herd animals. We read accounts in the Old Testament of the Patriarchs moving their herds, and that the family of Joseph (the sons of Israel/Jacob) were shepherds and were bringing their flocks with them into Egypt. Centuries later, King David, himself, was a shepherd before he was chosen to be the king (1 Sam. 16:11), and many of the prophecies relating to the coming Messiah were told in pastoral terms. In the New Testament, early on in Matthew we have confirmation of this pastoral identity of the Messiah when Jesus is referred to as the promised “...ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” In addition, in the gospels we hear references to shepherds and sheep in many episodes, especially prominent is the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke where Shepherds were the first witnesses to the Good News of the birth of Christ (Luke 2:8ff). Shepherds and sheep were part of the culture – they were known and expected parts of life. And, of course, the *most* important story in the history and culture of the people of Israel is the story of the Passover where they were spared the final plague in Egypt by spreading the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts. The Lamb, here, is a symbol of deliverance.

For Christians, too, this imagery is important, for Jesus on the cross is directly compared to this idea of the Passover Lamb: the perfect sacrifice given for the salvation of all. But, as we read in our Gospel, Jesus is not only the sacrificial lamb, but also calls himself the door of the sheep and the Good Shepherd.

The significance of this statement would not have been lost on the crowd listening to Jesus – and this is because of prophecies like we find in our Old Testament lesson for today. Speaking through the prophet and priest Ezekiel, the Lord decries all the leadership of the descendants of Israel for being bad shepherds. These leaders have led God’s people astray, let them wander, and their neglect allowed them to fall into danger. This is not how a shepherd is supposed to act. To fix this, God himself will become the Good Shepherd, he says, “Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out... and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness” (Ezek. 34.11-12).

Compared to the neglect the sheep have so far received, the Lord will ensure they are protected and well fed in green pastures. “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak” (Ezek. 34.16). And if that’s not enough, once the sheep are safe and no longer open prey for the wolves, he will ensure they are protected by delegating a descendant of his servant David to be the overseer of the flock. The descendant of David, the shepherd-king.

Fast forward to the Gospel of John: when Jesus tells his followers that he is the Good Shepherd, there are undoubtedly some in the crowd that immediately hear what he says between the lines. Who is the Good Shepherd in Ezekiel? The Lord. So this man, Jesus, is calling himself God.

But not only was Jesus calling himself God, but he was foretelling what was about to happen to him: for this Good Shepherd was about to give his life for the sheep. Rather than entrust his sheep any longer to hired hands who don't care about the sheep and flee at the first sign of danger, this shepherd will protect his sheep even if it costs him his own life. And, yes, just as the Lord in Ezekiel was referring to the Good Shepherd as uniting the lost sheep of the house of Israel, so, too, is Jesus' task. But, he goes a step further and even refers to "other sheep... which are not of this fold" (John 10.16) which he will reunite in his flock. Here, Jesus describes the work to happen through the Holy Spirit to unite the whole world under God's banner – to reconcile all of creation back to their creator.

The Good Shepherd, then, is a powerful symbol of protection, of sacrifice, of leadership, and of hope. For through this image of the Good Shepherd, we have window to understand the motives of God in saving the world upon the cross. For he loves his sheep, he knows his sheep, and his sheep know him.

Our Epistle today highlights the saving grace of the Good Shepherd, and even takes it a step further to apply to a very specific set of circumstances. St. Peter, in this excerpt, is addressing members of the slave class who are members of the Church. He first addressed the upper classes of society, the citizens, in a piece we will explore more *next* week, but here he addresses the bottom tier of society. No matter which specific community Peter was addressing, the demographics of the time suggest that the slave class likely made up 50% or more of the residents in a city. So, it is quite likely that a significant portion of the Church was made up of enslaved people.

In his message to the enslaved Christians, St. Peter shares a message with them that is just as applicable to us in our daily lives. In our suffering, for whatever reason, we should keep the grace of God on our minds. Remember the supreme good that he did for us nailed upon that tree – dying so that we might live. Though we might live in constant suffering, we can take heart that our Lord, our good shepherd, suffered too. That, even though we might be in a place that seems hopeless, if we remember our Lord and his grace, we can be strengthened to endure until we are freed from this bondage. "By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2.24). No matter how far we stray, no matter how much darkness we find ourselves in, there is always the hope that our Shepherd will bring us back to him.

This is a message that not only applies in the season after Easter, but it is especially poignant for us at this time of the year because it's still fresh for us: Jesus' death and resurrection – the events that changed the world.

The identity of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the symbolism that it represents, is a great comfort to those who believe in him. It is a promise of the protection we have at his hands, and it is a promise of the love that he has for us: a love that will lead him to make the ultimate sacrifice.

In the moments in our lives of despair, of lostness, of fear, or of crisis, we can be assured of the presence of God. Even if we reject him, he is nonetheless pursuing us to return us to the flock. If we seem alone, we can be assured that we are being sought. If we are hurt, we will be carried back in his loving arms. He has died for the sheep and will continue to die for the sheep. At the final day, as the book of Revelation tells us, "*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes*" (Revelation 7:17).

May we turn to him for all that he offers us, may we remember that he is seeking his lost sheep even if they don't know it. Thanks be to God for our redeemer, sacrificial lamb and great shepherd, our Risen Saviour Christ.