

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH B. GARDNER

The Fourth Sunday of Easter (B)



22 April 2018

Acts 4: 5-12
1 John 3:166-24
John 10:11-18
Psalm 23

Barukh attah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha 'olam

Against the advice of Elizabeth Keeler and Kristen Hawley, I decided to take Hebrew in seminary.

Like many of you, I'd already taken Latin and Greek in school.

Then, when I went to college I joined a sorority so I felt my knowledge of Greek was already excellent.

So I took Hebrew.

Now, even though my grades in Hebrew were THE WORST grades I got in seminary, I did learn a few things.

For example, Jewish tradition requires a blessing for major milestones but also for daily experiences.

Bless this child. Bless this house. But also bless my getting up today.

One is supposed to look at everything one receives, even bad news, as a blessing from God.

And almost all of the blessings begin like this:

Barukh attah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha 'olam

It means, Blessed art thou (blessed are you), Lord, our God, King (or master) of the Universe.

Century after century, season after season, year after year, day after day, the Jews were reminded that God was:

Lord.

King.

Master.

God was in power.

God was in charge.

Revered and respected.

Never questioned.

And throughout the history of the Israelites, there is this back and forth between God and God's chosen people.

God blesses.

The people enjoy.

They begin to take the blessing for granted.

God punishes.

The people repent.

And the cycle begins again.

Barukh attah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha 'olam

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the Universe.

And then comes Jesus.

I am the Bread

I am the Light

I am the Gate

I am the Vine

I am the Resurrection

I am the Good Shepherd...

Now we could talk about the **I am** statement.

How Jesus is reminding them first that he is God.

These “I am” statements would recall for his followers Exodus:

God said to Moses, “**I am** who **I am**.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘**I am** has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3.14)

We could also “unpack” the word **Good**.

We would look at the Greek word **kalos** and see that it means “noble”, “precious”, “honorable” and “lovely”.

Imagine knowing God is, of course, all powerful but also there is a loveliness to him.

There is nobility in the true sense of the word.

And of course we could look at what it means to be **shepherd**.

Shepherds - not western cowboy types we think about but the kind you would find in Palestine - love their sheep.

They named them and tended to them and cared for them.

The sheep know their voice and they follow them.

Like a child knows a parent’s voice in a crowded room.

They traveled lightly but carried a couple of things:

A sack for food - usually olives, bread, a little cheese.

A sling they used to either to drive off animals or to redirect the sheep.

And they had a rod which was used to defend themselves and the sheep.

It was usually a stick with a big knot on the end and sometimes they would have nails or sharp rocks on the end.

And they also carried a staff - a shepherd's crook - to gently guide the sheep or rescue them if they feel or got stuck.

If you were a sheep, you'd take comfort in knowing your shepherd was prepared to protect you and guide you if they had these things.

So...

We could take the easy route and talk about how Jesus used examples everyone could understand...

And that Jesus was there to guide people in a loving and gentle way to the Father.

But you're smarter than that.

(I'm not because I took Hebrew.)

But *you* know that this is John's Gospel.

And John is a lot of things but John is not necessarily easy.

And you would remember that Matthew and Mark and Luke tell us the How and the Where and the Who of Jesus.

And John tells us the WHY.

So WHY Jesus would call himself the Good Shepherd.

Well, **one reason**, I suspect, is because we are a little bit like sheep.

Some people say sheep are dumb.

I'm not prepared to go that far.

We were visiting our goddaughters who live on a farm in upstate New York and they have sheep - along with a lot of other animals but Jesus didn't say I am the Head Rooster or I am the Bull.

Yikes!

I can summarize my time with their sheep with one word: unsuccessful.

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We are a little unruly and we need someone who will tend to us.

Another reason is because God is little bit like a shepherd.

Jesus is at work in the midst of us.

Walking along side of us.

Even when we are unruly or lost or wandering.

Our shepherd never leaves us... not in the valley of the shadow of death, not in mistakes we make, not in the regrets we have.

And we all have them.

Like that weekend we hope no one finds out about.

Or that tax return where we “forgot” to include all of our income.

Or that time when we were sure no one was looking.

Or that addiction we pretend we don't have.

Listen, I'm not saying all of things aren't ok.

I'm not - and they're not.

But what I am saying is that when we admit to ourselves that we are sinners, we're in good company.

When we recognize our unbelief, we're in good company.

Remember, the disciples believed, lied about believing, didn't believe, and then believed again.

Being a sinner doesn't disqualify you.

Not believing doesn't disqualify you.

Which takes me to the **third reason** WHY Jesus said "I am the Good Shepherd"

Because there are some lost sheep.

There are more sheep that need his love, his tenderness, and his protection.

That is why God continues to call people from all walks of life, from every nation, and from every generation...

From two thousand years since Jesus first uttered those words until today when we hear them again here.

And as part of the flock, God relies on us to reach out to those who might need to hear the shepherd's voice.

To encourage friends and family members who no longer go to church, or who don't identify as Christian anymore.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one who laid down his life for the sheep - all the sheep!

For the broken and the lost.

For the sinners and the unbelievers.

For you and for me.

So, if I were to wonder WHY John tells us Jesus is the Good Shepherd, I would say it is because that is exactly what we need.

We need a good shepherd.

To lead us into a deeper relationship with our Heavenly Father.

So we don't follow money, or power, or fame, or other shepherds that can lead us astray.

To help us mend broken relationship we've pretended doesn't need fixing.

To offer us a noble, precious, and good life lived without regret and shame.

And we need a flock.

One that loves us not just for who we are but for who we can be.

No other flock does that.

No neighborhood.

No school.

No political party.

No job.

Sometimes not even our families.

The hard questions we need to ask ourselves are:

Who is our shepherd?

And where is our flock?

I think that is Why of John's gospel today.

It isn't easy.

It never is.

But luckily, Jesus also said, Follow me.

Blessed are you, the good the shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep.



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