

Let us pray. Heavenly God, I pray that you would move in the hearts of your people this morning. I pray that your word would be heard, that it would bind up the broken hearted, that it would give sight to the blind and motion to the stagnant. I pray that your Word, and not mine, would be heard today. In the name of Father, Son, and Spirit, Amen.

There once was a Presbyterian minister who found himself on a sinking ship. After it had sunk completely, and he was treading water in the middle of the ocean, he prayed to God that the Lord would reach out his mighty arm and save him from this calamity. A short time later, a fellow survivor floated by, clinging to a life preserver. "Grab hold!" the man called to our minister. "No thanks", he responded calmly, "I know that God will lead me to safety." The man floated on by, and soon a lifeboat from the crash came by, with some of the original crew on board. They offered him a spot on the boat, but he declined again, saying again "I know that God will lead me to safety." They paddled on by. Time passed, and a coast guard helicopter flew overhead and stopped, lowering a rope. The minister, through chattering teeth, reassured them not to worry, that God would lead him to safety, and the helicopter returned to shore. The minister drowned, and found himself at the pearly gates. He turned to St. Peter, and asked why God hadn't acted to save him. St. Peter turned to him, and said, "He threw you a life preserver, a boat, and a helicopter! What more did you expect?"

Sometimes we all put expectations on God. Like the poor confused minister, we assume we know what role God will play, and exactly how God will play it. There are tropes we have, images of who God is and what God's role is that are so ingrained that we hardly pause to consider them. Take, for example, our Psalm from this morning. "The Lord is my Shepherd". Without a doubt, the best known Psalm of them all. It is the favorite of many, it brings real comfort to us to hear the words, to be reminded of God's strong presence with us, leading us along the journey by the still waters and through the dark valleys of our lives.

We often see ourselves as the sheep. Led along and cared for, protected and watched over. Isaiah says that "all we like sheep have gone astray" and Jesus tells the story of the shepherd's pursuit of the one sheep that leaves the fold of ninety nine others. When we hear a scripture reading on Sunday morning, and we hear the word "sheep", the savvy churchgoer hardly needs to listen. We know what's going on. Jesus is the shepherd, and we are the sheep.

This is Good Shepherd Sunday, the fourth Sunday in the season of Easter. Not only our Psalm, but our reading from John is also about sheep. Jesus speaks of the shepherd's care for the sheep, he talks about the care the shepherd shows, leading the sheep to the safety of the fold, caring for their well-being. "Ah yes, we can say, I know where you're going with *this* one, Jesus. You're going to say "I am the good shepherd", and that makes us the sheep."

But in John 10:7, Jesus doesn't say "I AM the good shepherd". He does say it elsewhere, but not this time. This time, he says "I AM the gate". Waaait. I thought I knew everyone involved here: shepherds and sheep. Maybe thieves, or darkness, but mostly shepherds and sheep. Not gates. Because if Jesus is the gate, then who is the shepherd? For that matter, who are the sheep?

There is a danger when we assume we are always the sheep. Sheep are, as a rule, irresponsible. They are fluffy and vulnerable to all sorts of things. They do nothing without being told to, and they need constant supervision and guidance. These are not qualities to

be proud of. That's not the way to shine God's light in the world, or work to build a new kingdom. If we see ourselves always as the sheep, then we always see ourselves as the victim, as the one who is put upon, the one who needs protection, the one who needs God to come and rescue *us*. It is true that we rely on God's strength in all we do and asking in humility for God to lead us must be our first step, but we are not called to be sheep. The danger is, if we look at the world only with the eyes of sheep, we need to distinguish only two things: Our leader, and danger. Our leader is easy, that is Jesus. So seeing danger becomes easy too, because it is everything else. If we live like this, we live lives of anxiety, lives like sheep.

In this reading from John, it is not Jesus who is the shepherd. He is the gate, and others bring the sheep into the fold through him. I think that here, we might not be the sheep. We might be the shepherds. When we are shepherds, we are looking for something new: we are looking for sheep. We are looking for lost sheep, for those we can bring to the gate and to safety.

This story in John is a story of Shepherds, Sheep and Thieves, and one Gate. Our calling is not to stay in the pen. Our calling is like that of Jesus to the apostle Peter: "Care for my sheep". We are a part of the apostolic church, and the word "apostle" comes from the greek "apostello", which means "I send". We are the sent, sent out to care for the sheep.

When we face trouble in our lives, it is easy for us to get stuck, thinking only about ourselves and God, about the help we need from God and the safety we find in God's care. We get tunnel vision, like the drowning minister, we ignore everything around us and turn inwards, waiting for God to work privately, to reach out just to us. Hallelujah, often he does. But if we only ever think about ourselves, we're failing in our calling.

When we face trouble in our lives, we are also called to be shepherds, to look around us with empathy, to look not just for danger, but also for lost sheep. God forgive us for the times we turn away from those who need help and love because we are aspiring only to be like sheep. It is easy to dismiss other children of God and forget that they are not the enemy, they are just lost sheep.

It may shock you to learn that Michelle and I can sometimes get frustrated with each other. And when we do, it is so easy for me to think only about myself, how I've been under pressure, how I'm busy, and tired, and how I need to be cared for. I've learned that's not really helpful, nor does it make me feel like I'm following Christ. It's hard, and I often fumble, but I do try to remember that Michelle is not the enemy, that she might also be under some pressure. It's just possible she's a bit tired and sore, too. I can't just look with sheep's eyes.

I also had a friend who had the courage to talk with me earlier with some thoughts on how to improve my sermon preparation. This friend is very gentle, and it was pretty clearly difficult to bring it up and try to shepherd me, but I am very glad for the courage that they showed in our conversation as we shoveled snow together, because it has challenged me and helped me grow, and Michelle, at least, says it made an impact. I'm glad that I talked with a Christian trying to be a shepherd and not just a sheep.

May God give us the strength and the courage to be good shepherds. May we learn to lead the way to the gate. May we care for others just as Christ cares for us, seeking them, carrying them on our shoulders instead of leaving them to their own. May we be protectors of those who are afraid, may we be guides for those who are lost, may we bring the lonely of this world into the fold through our one true gate. We may be just sheep today, but that is not what we will remain. May the Spirit transform us, in Jesus name. Amen.

Generous and loving God, Your steadfast love endures throughout the ages.
Generation after generation, you offer renewal and rest
to all who are lost or who carry heavy burdens.

However far we have strayed, you have found us and guided us beside still waters.
You have restored our souls.
You lead us in path of righteousness, and remain with us even in the darkest of valleys.
You prepare a table before us and gift us with abundant life.
You are our hope, life and happiness. At all times and in all circumstances you are perfect
grace and endless love and we are moved to worship you as the Creating God,
the redeeming Son, and the leading Spirit.

Hear us now as we confess the sins we have committed against you and one another:

Ever-patient God, endless in love and abundant in mercy
trusting in your great love and kindness we confess that
while we were created to love, too often we have withheld forgiveness, kindness and
friendship;
while we have been called to be compassionate, too often we are cold
and full of judgment;
while we have been called to follow, too often we are distracted by our own
desires and plans.
Forgive us for the ways we fall short and renew a right spirit within us.

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not
always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so
great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he
removed our transgressions from us.

Holy and gracious God, shepherd of our lives, we come with thanksgiving for you are
our provider and sustainer. You transform our weary and tired souls with your grace, wisdom
and love.

Holy and powerful God, shepherd of the world, we pray for politicians and judges and
for all who form and keep law; for the rulers of the nations who have in their power and
responsibility the safety and well-being of your people.

Holy and loving God, shepherd of your people, we remember before you all those
who suffer. We pray for children, for those who live alone or in crowded dwellings and those
with no place to live; for the lonely and the tired, for those with too much to do and those with
too little. We pray for the people of South Sudan, who have no water ..., and for the people
of Ontario and Quebec, who have too much water....

We pray for all who are grieving a loss or mourning a death.

We pray for those carrying heavy burdens, for those who feel unloved and unworthy,,
and from the silence of our hearts we lift up to you our deepest needs:

These things we pray in the name of your Son, the Good Shepherd.

