

The Good Shepherd?

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Sermon for April 25, 1999

Lessons for Easter 4 in Year A

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

As you all know by now, I am *not* a professional sermon writer. I look forward to the few times a year that I'm normally called on to write a sermon with the same amount of joy as the student who's told that they need to write a two page paper - a *good* two page paper with no filler. And yet I continue to do the occasional sermon from time to time because people have told me that I'm good at it, and keep asking me to do them. I figure that as long as I have a lot of lead time to prepare, and often have the choice of whether or not I want to take a particular preaching assignment based on how easy or hard it is to get something out of the readings, I can do this. And in seven years, I've only been burned once by a set of readings

So when I saw that this was Good Shepherd Sunday, and that the readings addressed this theme, I was all set. I knew that there were certain things I wanted to say, and certain ways I wanted to start out.

First of all, I'd address my problems with the whole "shepherd" thing. I mean yeah, we all know that the shepherd watches the sheep, he guards the sheep, he takes care of the sheep, he goes out and looks for the lost sheep. But why does he do this? So he can *eat* them. Well OK, wool is a factor too, but you gotta admit that some of those sheep are gonna be dinner. Obviously, this causes some problems with the image of Jesus as a shepherd.

Then I thought I'd mention my problems with the 23rd psalm when I was a kid. I remember learning it the old way, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and thinking that if the Lord's my shepherd, it doesn't make sense for me to not want him. When I asked Mrs Olsen at Vacation Bible School about this (does every Lutheran Church have a Mrs Olsen?), she explained to me the subtleties of poetic Elizabethan English, and it made sense to me for about

three days, after which I was confused again. It wasn't until I was in college that I thought about it again, and finally understood what it meant. I thought I might tie this into how the way we first understand things is not necessarily the way they're *meant* to be understood - even when the wording seems so obvious to us.

Then I thought about the image of Jesus as the gate for the sheep. This is an image that made vivid sense to me when my daughter Devra was an infant. She hated her crib, and would sleep with us in our bed at night. Actually, since my wife works the night shift at Crouse, Devra would sleep with *me* in the bed at night. Our bed was against a wall, so Dev would sleep on the wall side and I'd sleep on the floor side so that she couldn't roll or crawl out without getting past me. Every time she tried to, I'd look at her and say, "I am the gate." Of course, one night she *did* get past me, but that's another story altogether.

Yeah, by last Sunday I had some pretty good ideas for a Good Shepherd sermon, and was going to sit down and finally work on it sometime during the week. But something happened on Tuesday that shot the whole thing to Hell. Something happened on Tuesday that made it impossible for me to write a nice warm, fuzzy Good Shepherd sermon, because by Tuesday night I had a few questions about the kind of job the shepherd was doing protecting his sheep. I'm, of course, talking about Littleton, Colorado, and the 12 sheep that were taken from us there. When I first heard the news, I knew that that was going to mess up a lot of Good Shepherd Sunday sermons by better sermonizers than myself.

After all, how can we talk about a Good Shepherd who allows his sheep to be lost like that? How can we talk about the shepherd taking care of his sheep when something horrible like this has just

happened? And don't the events in Littleton make a mockery of the whole concept of a Good Shepherd? Doesn't the concept of the Good Shepherd make a mockery of the pain the people in Littleton are going through? How do we explain the Good Shepherd to the world when things like this happen?

For the next 24 hours or so I had a few heated conversations with God. OK, so they were mostly monologues, since I don't usually hear him talking back. And I pretty much said that I didn't like the job he was doing, that I didn't understand why he had to do things this way, and that I wasn't happy with the situation. I remembered a recent column in *Christianity Today* where Philip Yancey argued against the idea of the clockwork universe where the creator winds it up and walks away just watching what happens, but not getting involved, and said to God, "Well for Pete's sake, no wonder people out there feel it's a clockwork universe! With things like this going on in it, and no apparent action or intervention from you, it sure looks like it!"

I let God have it with both barrels. Don't be afraid to do this. Don't hide your emotions from God. Don't come to him behind the mask of how you *think* you should be, but come to him as you *are*, so that he might know *you* and not the mask. God can handle your anger, your frustration, your disappointment, your sorrow. And only by getting it out can you begin to face those emotions and work through them - with his help.

I had to face those emotions and work through them before I could write anything meaningful for this morning. And as I kept dwelling on the question of why he let something like this happen, of why the Good Shepherd allowed 12 of his sheep to be lost, I remembered an email message I received a year ago.

Valerie had written about a tragedy that had occurred in her town. A man she knew, and his ten-year-old son had lost one of those horribly stupid car/train races that there are far too many of. And she asked how she could explain to her kids that the same Jesus who intervened to die on the cross for us could let kids die in accidents like this.

I'm no idiot. I've learned over the years that when a woman asks a question, she's not necessarily looking for an answer, but is more likely just thinking out loud. I knew that if I gave an answer without being very careful, I was likely to have my head snatched off. So I hesitated before responding. And when I *did* respond, I told her that I might have a workable answer if she wanted it, and put the ball in *her court* to ask me for it if she really wanted it. She wanted the answer.

So I told her that Jesus came to save us from the *eternal* consequences of our sins, and not the *temporary* consequences of our stupidity. And that from an eternal perspective (which I'd like to think that we have), death is a *temporary* consequence.

When I remembered what I'd written to Valerie, everything changed. The Good Shepherd may not have been doing the job *I* wanted him to do, but he wasn't exactly asleep on the job either. He had a different perspective than I did. The twelve sheep in Littleton may have been *temporarily* lost to *us*, but not to him.

And with any luck - he has the two black sheep, the two black trenchcoat sheep, too.

Ooh, that's galling for us, isn't it? It's horribly galling, and it offends our sense of justice. It offends our sense of right and wrong. There's a large part of us that wants to see these guys go straight to Hell, and roast there for several eternities. And yet, because we're Christians, that's the last thing we're supposed to hope for *anyone*. The galling thing about Christianity, the scandal of it, and the truly wonderful thing about it, is that we are to want good even - maybe even *especially* for - those who hate us and do us harm. We shouldn't be hoping that *anyone* goes to Hell, but should be actively praying for all that we think are in danger of heading there. We are to pray that they *do* get to the Good Shepherd.

And so the Good Shepherd is both galling and wonderful. Who does he go after? Not the sheep who never left, but *the ones who are lost*. And is there anyone we can consider more lost at this point than the two sheep in black trenchcoats? Can we think of anyone more in need of the Good Shepherd right now than those two?

And yet, the eternal perspective isn't everything. There is still much to do here. How can we help others here to hear the voice of the Shepherd? How can we help others here to know the difference between the voice of the Shepherd and the voices of those who would kill and steal? Could we somehow have been the voice of the Shepherd to the two black sheep of Littleton? Can we now be the voice of the Shepherd here in our community to prevent

others from following the wrong voice, the voice of death and destruction? Or will we always lose *some*, no matter how hard we try?

Do not despair. The Good Shepherd is on the job, regardless of what things look like at the moment in Colorado, Kosovo, or some other place where it appears that sheep are being lost.

This is most certainly true!