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## *The Good Shepherd*

**The Rev. CanonCarolynne G. Williams**  
**The Cathedral of St. Philip**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
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**The Fourth Sunday of Easter - Year C**  
**John 10:22-30**

When I was a little girl, maybe 10 or 11, I would often ride with my dad on the weekends. Even though I was not interested in the places where he would stop, I would go because it gave me time to visit with my Dad. He was with me and I was with him. He would go to the same places that he and my mother would discuss on a continuing basis. I later learned that these were places where they had fiscal interest and responsibilities. The Harlem Cut-rate Drug Store on Jackson Street. The Emporium Shoe Mart on Monroe St. A vacant parcel of land on Whitney Avenue. These were the same places that they would discuss at dinner with others.

I later came to understand that when I rode with my Dad to these places, he was going to look things over, survey the progress of the week or measure the atmosphere of the places of business at that moment.

Usually, when I was invited to join my Dad, my Mom and sister remained at home. My sister is six years younger, so I had my Dad all to myself.

One of these places where he stopped was the Emporium Shoe Mart, which was located in a business neighborhood. Across the street from the Shoe Mart was Dr. Hamilton's office, our dentist. His wife was my kindergarten teacher. Mrs. Hamilton, Ms. Odessa as we called her, is still living. She is 104. She taught my kindergarten class about God.

On one corner was a grocery store run by the King family. Next to the grocery store run by the King family was a dress shop. And across the street from the King grocery store and dress shop was another grocery store. But, we did not patronize that grocery store. So I did not know that family.

On the opposite corner of the grocery store was a church. We were not members of this church. So I knew nothing about it and my parents did not discuss it. Because they did not discuss this church, I believed that this particular church was really not that important. This church however, is the point of my story. On this particular late afternoon, while my dad was inside of the Shoe Mart, I became bored and went outside to watch the world go by on Monroe Street and perhaps find something of interest.

I was in front of the Shoe Mart and I began to hear music. The music was not music that I normally heard in church or anywhere else, so this really piqued my interest even more. I ventured down the sidewalk and peered into the open windows which opened at an angle. The windows were pushed out, rather than raised. As I peered into the window, standing on the sidewalk, I discovered that I had found the place where the music was coming from.

There were people in the pews singing, but they were not singing from hymnals to which I was accustomed. Others were

robed in white. They stood around the altar, their arms raised, and their voices rang out. The instruments which were being played were different types of instruments and they had a tambourine. There were still others robed in white dancing around the altar; raising their arms toward the heavens and saying the words, "Glory to God. Let God's name be praised!"

This went on which seemed like a very long time. I had never seen anything like it before. And then I saw those who were not robed in white, get up out of their pew and begin to walk to the beat of the music and they were clapping their hands. I later learned that this was called "walking the pew".

Years later I came to learn that this was one tradition that some of God's people have as a part of their worship experience. All of what I had seen and heard pointed toward worshipping God and God alone and being in God's sacred space.

My gaze was broken when I heard my Dad calling me. I turned and ran back to the Shoe Mart.

Did I ask my dad about what I had witnessed? Of course I did. I don't remember exactly what he said, but his response was enough to satisfy my questions. I told my mom about what had happened in that church near the Shoe Mart and asked the same questions. My Mom's response to my questions was about the same.

Our lesson from the Book of Revelation is a description of what could have been imagined in my mind's eye at age 11. The difference was that I saw this. I am not sure about who was sitting on the throne in their eyes, the congregation, but the image of those robed in white praising God and singing with voice and cymbal and tambourine has stayed with me to this day. An image that was impressionable on an 11 year olds mind. Our lesson from the Book of Revelation says this:

"For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

What I have come to embrace is that the good shepherd, the God that is worshipped, the God that we pray our bidding prayer to "Almighty God" unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: We are bidding in prayer that God will hear us, God will know who we and we pray for inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that we may love God in a perfect manner and glorify God's name. And we bid in our prayer for God to enable us to do this thorough Jesus Christ our Lord. The Almighty One.

This is the same good shepherd that this congregation and their instruments being played were expressing in their love for God. This God was one and the same. The same good shepherd that loves them also loves you and me. This shepherd that they were singing about and dancing to God's glory as they stood on their feet is the same shepherd that guides one to and through the springs of life according to revelation.

Does this God care how we worship Does this good shepherd judge us by how we praise, love and worship God's presence? I would hope that God's promise to each of us as the good shepherd is that God only wants us to continue to build a relationship with the Almighty One.

The good shepherd receives what we offer, all of what we offer from our heart and utilizes what we offer in ways that we never imagined and touches others often as angels unaware.

In our symbolism the good shepherd always has a staff. The staff is there as a symbol to help pull us back into the fold when we have moved away from it. Does God notice when we have strayed? I believe God does. Not so much because God is watching, but because when we stray from the love of God our relationships with one another become estranged.

One of my colleagues refers to the cruciform, the cross representing relationship through prayer. If we are strengthening our relationship in a vertical manner then our relationship with one another in a horizontal manner will be strengthened. This happens because of our image of God and our relationship with God.

When we stray and God has to come and find us and bring us back to the fold our relationships with one another which may have become distant and unengaged are given another chance to flourish and grow. The good shepherd enables us to

do this through the grace that is given.

The good shepherd says, "I will shelter you, I will protect you but most of all I will love you as you love me."

I suppose that those people who were expressing themselves in a manner to which I was not accustomed loved God just as much as you and I do. We express our love in many different ways. And that is okay with God, I believe. I believe God is our shepherd and we have been encouraged to trust this.

"The lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name sake." NRSV, (pg.553)

Not for our name sake, but God's name sake.

There are a group of people who live in a community that I am somewhat familiar with beyond the octogenarian age. Many are Nonagenarians (between the ages of 90 and 99) moving toward becoming centenarians. Most of them are not physically well but their minds are still accurate in many ways. It may take them a little longer to recall facts but when they are finally recalled, they are as accurate as one can get. In the midst of their infirmities, their sufferings and their joy, we say the 23rd psalm. They say it with joy in their voices, peace on their faces and openness in their hearts. I believe they are thinking about the good shepherd; the one they learned about a long time ago. We say the words together as we praise the one who shelters us all.

Timothy Keller, the author of *The Reason for God* speaks of a woman in his congregation who complained that she had prayed and prayed over and over, "God, help me to find you," but had gotten no where. A Christian friend suggested to her that she might change her prayer to "God, come and find me. After all, you are the good shepherd who goes looking for the lost sheep." Keller remembers the only reason she said that she could tell that story to him was that God did. God found her. *The Reason for God*, (pg. 240).

Well, the Emporium Shoe Mart, The Harlem Cut Rate Drug Store and that church no longer exist. The big box stores came to town and the church moved to another location. But my 104-year-old kindergarten teacher, Ms. Odessa, the one who taught kindergartners about the good shepherd is still there. So, when I return to my hometown in the future, I will visit her. Perhaps together we will say the 23rd psalm about the good shepherd again. She introduced us to him. He is still sheltering her.

Amen.

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