
Do You Believe?

A sermon by Canon Carolynne Williams
Easter 4 – Year B

Being referred to as sheep, as Christians are in our gospel today, is not very appealing.

The good shepherd is a positive image and having a good shepherd to lead the sheep is encouraging.

What is **not** encouraging is to be viewed as sheep **blindly** following the one who leads.

It is tempting to sentimentalize this imagery. Sheep are not known for marked intelligence or having a good disposition. What happens to those who follow the good shepherd is there is a recognition which takes place. The recognition occurs when the voice of encouragement is heard by the sheep.

The voice of encouragement is heard when the one who leads has the best interest of those following, at heart.

This metaphor of the good shepherd and the sheep dates back to early Christian tradition. The imagery of the shepherd and the sheep was used by the Greeks during classical times to refer to the God Hermes and it was an icon in the near east for more than a thousand years, before it became a Christian symbol.

Many of the most significant characters in the Hebrew bible and in the story of Israel – from Abel to Amos – are keepers of flocks.

Abraham and Sarah.

Isaac and Rebekah.

Jacob and Leah and Rachael.

Joseph.

Moses and David.

If we take this analogy of the Shepherd and the sheep and lay it over the relationship between Jesus and the Father, there is a clearer understanding of our relationship with God, the Father and how we in our Christian way of being come alive.

In our systems of beliefs today, this is most often the point in which separation is seen and lived in the sense of what you and I believe and what we don't believe. Look at the circumstances of peoples around the world.

Our relationship with God is strengthened through our relationship with Jesus Christ.

The light of Christ is evident during these great fifty days of Easter. Who are you following during these great fifty days? Who are you following as the shepherd in your life? Who are others following as the shepherd in their lives?

When we are alert and paying attention, we see the evidence. It is there for us to see. The faith of others is evident in

community, in relationship with one another.

The extent of one's faith becomes a shining light within the darkness which prevails in living. But the darkness through suffering, does not overcome. The darkness does not overtake. The transparent and deepness of love for us overshadows the valleys and brings us to a place of peace. Always.

When we accept the example of love shown and given to us, freely, our place in this world, in the midst of all of its strife, chaos and violence, becomes clearer.

There are those today who don't believe. Jesus tells his listeners that they do not believe because they are not his sheep.

He says that HIS sheep listen to his voice and give heed to his words and teachings.

God cares for his own. This goes beyond that of a shepherd caring for his sheep.

God provides more than green pastures and still waters from which they eat and drink.

"He revives my soul, and guides me along right pathways for his namesake."

Jesus offers them eternal life. His sheep will never perish or be snatched out of his hand, because they have been given to him by Abba Father. Therefore no power can separate them from God.

Tabitha, in the book of Acts, was a woman of independence, but along with her independence came a deep faith. She believed in the relationship between God and God's son.

Because of the relationship between God and God's son, we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to shepherd us through the pitfalls and landmines of Life.

And even when we are unable to avoid the detours, the love of the Shepherd is present for the sheep.

We come to know that the goodness and mercy of God are forever with us, even when we cannot perceive goodness and mercy.

And we know ourselves as heirs of the place that the Lord has prepared for us.

To perceive goodness and mercy in the places that are totally unexpected is a gift to each of us who believes in the unconditional love of God.

It is a gift to those who want to believe in eternal life.

"With the Resurrection, the Messianic period of salvation began, when victory over death and the triumph of life is celebrated with Christ".

The Father loves the shepherd. The Shepherd is good, the Shepherd is beautiful. Not in the sense of physical beauty, but in the sense of what he was doing. When the Shepherd calls, people want to come.

"When they realize he has died for them, they want even more. The point of calling Jesus the good shepherd is to emphasize the strange, compelling power of his love." (*John For Everyone*, p.154)

"Having faith is a risk. Our human intellect and searching mind accompany many to a point, but then a deep abyss opens in front of us; to cross it, human searching is insufficient. One who dares to leap over the abyss finds oneself on the firm ground of faith." (Kierkegaard. *How Can We Know?*, A.N. Wilson.)

Wilson, in an essay on Christian religion as he writes about C.S. Lewis says this:

"The dawn of one's knowledge of God comes from God. It prompts one to respond to the call and another to reject the call. We will have gone far along the road on our journey, before we start to guess the end of the journey or the identity is recognized, as it has been and is by countless believers, the experience is unmistakable." (*How Can We Know?*, A.N. Wilson)

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep."

The question becomes for us becomes, do you believe? Do you with conviction truly believe?

Amen.

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