

## Shepherd – Safe and Strong©

John 10:11-18

April 29, 2012

Rev. Sharlyn Gates

Aren't you glad Lent is over? The alleluias are being sung once again? All the Wild Things in our lives have been conquered, the wilderness is behind us – no more anxiety, no more concerns, no more worries. Easter has come and it's all joy and everything is rosy and perfect in life. Right? No sickness? No financial concerns? No relationship problems? No grief? Oh yea, I'd better take off my rose colored glasses!

Unfortunately, the joy and reality of Easter did not end suffering and pain, did it? It did not end it for the disciples or for any of his followers in those early days after his resurrection and Easter did not end those things for us either.

So why the celebration? What is the significance of resurrection? And what does it mean for us to think of Jesus as this metaphor – this Good Shepherd?

I wonder - do we have a true picture of what a shepherd does? Most of us have seen sheep and a few of us can probably say we have raised sheep. But knowing sheep and knowing a shepherd is not the same thing.

We often have a very pastoral image of shepherds with their sheep, I think. We see pictures of shepherds in peaceful settings with their sheep out in the fields. But, in Jesus' day, and probably in some areas of our world still today, a shepherd's job is not all peaceful, calm and quiet. It is hard, dirty work. And the shepherd does not have the most respect of other people either. They are low on the ladder of importance.

A shepherd is responsible for making sure every single sheep is safe. He (or she) keeps awake, ready at any time to fight off the wild animals that would love to come and devour the little lambs. A shepherd goes off alone with his rod and climbs down deep crevices to rescue a sheep that has wandered away and fallen off the rocky path into the deep ravine.

A shepherd knows each sheep individually; he has names for them, he knows their unique needs, their markings, preferences and temperament. A shepherd who cares for the sheep and takes his responsibility seriously is brave and risks his life to care for the sheep. It is very hard work being a shepherd!

The problem I see with being a shepherd is that most shepherds are human. It would take a very dedicated person to actually go so far as to give his own life to protect sheep, (as cute as they are). If I were a shepherd of sheep and a wild animal was gnashing his terrible teeth and showing his terrible claws, before he even got close enough for me to see him rolling his terrible eyes – I'm afraid I'd be out of there! I'm just not that brave.

Somehow, I think most of us would do the same thing – if it were a choice between the life of the sheep or us. We would certainly feel sad and terrible that the sheep were killed and that we couldn't save them, but hey, what good would it be for the shepherd to be dead? How would that save any sheep?

In John's text, Jesus actually refers to shepherds that think more of caring for themselves than the flock they are watching over. The difference is they are the hired hand. They don't have that much concern for the sheep because the sheep don't really belong to the hired hand. He doesn't know the sheep or care about them. He cares more for himself.

In Ezekiel 34 and in Jeremiah 23 and Zechariah 11 there are references to shepherds – God is the Good Shepherd, the one whom the flock belongs to, as in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that we love so much. But those Old Testament prophets also talk about shepherds who are bad, who are charged with the care of the sheep but their primary concern is for their own well being at the expense of the flock. They neglect the sheep and the sheep scatter and are devoured by the wild things in the wilderness. Here we are talking metaphors!

All of these Old Testament references point to the leaders of Israel and Judah who were supposed to be leading and watching over the people. And Jesus seems to be pointing a finger at the temple leaders too, especially after this last go round with them about the blind man who was healed by Jesus, who refused to listen to the witness of the man who was healed.

“The sheep know my voice and they listen and they follow. And there are other sheep outside of this flock as well. And they will all listen and come together and be one flock.”

Such an interesting statement, isn't it? For those Jewish leaders who had the perception that they were the shepherds and that there was only one people who belonged to God, (the Jewish people of Israel), it was a slap in the face. The fact is, they were the ones who were on the outside since they did not listen to the voice or follow. On the other hand, many who were considered outsiders were the now the insiders – the prostitutes, the sinners, the women, the tax collectors, the sick, the blind, the lame – all who would listen to the voice of the true Good Shepherd and follow him. Even the gentiles, the ones who were not of the Jewish faith or race would be included –

even US! Even we who have been lost and unsure of their way are included in this flock. Even those who are afraid and confused and sick over choices we've made in their lives – even we are given care and love and forgiveness and healing. Even those who are in grief because a loved one is gone and they feel lonely and like no one else speaks their language anymore – they are gathered in. Even the drunk or the mom strung out on meth or the girl who wandered away from her family and got into all sorts of trouble ---

all of them. All of us. You and me and all who hear his voice and listen and follow. We have a Good Shepherd who not only risked his life for us but who died protecting us. He loved us so fully that he would give his all keeping us safe.

He says I know my sheep and my sheep know me. The word *know* implies a very deep, intimate relationship. It is one of deep love. The difference is that this shepherd first has a complete love relationship with the Father. He is completely obedient to God in full love and it is because of that love with the Father that he is able to completely and fully love us.

Even though Easter is past and we still find ourselves facing the terrible Wild Things in life, we find that we can rest and find joy and know safety and peace and love because Jesus rose from the dead. The hymn goes "up from the grave he arose with a mighty triumph o'er his foes."

The Good Shepherd is our safe place. He is strong and powerful and he will never allow our enemies to take us over. He provides for us so we shall not want. He is the truth of Romans 8 that promises that nothing shall separate us from the love of God. He gives the new life that makes us a new creation and transforms us into disciples. And he is our model of love and perseverance so that we who are part of his flock should strive to be like in every way.

We are never alone. We are always being watched over, cared for, known individually and loved in spite of ourselves.

There is a little illustration that has been passed around by email and Facebook. The story goes like this:

A mother was concerned about her kindergarten son walking to school. He didn't want his mother to walk with him. She wanted to give him the feeling that he had some independence but yet know that he was safe. So she had an idea of how to handle it. She asked a neighbor if she would please follow him to school in the mornings, staying at a distance, so he probably wouldn't notice her. The neighbor said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed.

The next school day, the neighbor and her little girl set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbor girl he knew. She did this for the whole week.

As the two kids walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, Timmy's little friend noticed the same lady was following them as she seemed to do every day all week. Finally she said to Timmy, 'Have you noticed that lady following us to school all week? Do you know her?'

Timmy nonchalantly replied, 'Yeah, I know who she is.'

The little girl said, 'Well, who is she?'

'That's just Shirley Goodnest,' Timmy replied, 'and her daughter Marcy.'

'Shirley Goodnest? Who is she and why is she following us?'

'Well,' Timmy explained, 'every night my Mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers, 'cuz she worries about me so much. And in the Psalm, it says, ' Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life', so I guess I'll just have to get used to it!'

Easter people, you might as well get used to it too, if you haven't already. Shirley Goodnest and Marcy will be following you all the days of your life – and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Maybe Easter doesn't bring the end of suffering and hardship. But Easter does bring the hope of a new day, of strength of a community of faith, of resurrection in many moments of our lives, and the promise that God loves us no matter what. We are safe with the Good Shepherd of God.

*© Copyright 2012. All Rights Reserved.*