

Easter 2 2021

Psalm 23

I Peter 2:19ff.

John 10:11-18

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, + and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

We share today with millions of the faithful around the world in the Sunday of the Good Shepherd. While some, like us, hold watch on this second Sunday after Easter, others will read the parable next week. In either case it is an historic text which brings us to the heart of Easter and the message of supreme Love. Let me suggest that you consider this: what we are encountering is the most tenacious, edgy, and mature love this small sphere has ever imagined or received!

Reading the Gospel produced a flashback. The setting was at least 60 years ago returning me to the little parish building where our family worshipped and from which my father heard and answered a life altering vocation. Visualize a small brick facility accessed by a set of steps to the nave, where a single aisle led to a sacramental table, pulpit, and chancel. There were a few small rooms behind with steps leading down to a parish hall. Off the side of that hall were quarters which served as educational spaces. They were rock walled, musty in the summer heat, and became a 'home room' for us as children. In the front was a felt board on easel, and the center piece on the wall a picture of Christ the Good Shepherd. It was one of those images that likely came from the late 30's or mid 40's, times lived in the frightful shadows of the Great Depression and WW II, and when there was a need for light and hope. So, Jesus appeared in soft pastels, his robes clean, neatly pressed, and draping as if tailored. Around his shoulder was a small, equally prim and clean lamb having been rescued from some unspoken distress. All the dirt of life had been eradicated. It was all very proper and softly a comfort to children. The Jesus who comes to us today, while loving children deeply, is no patsy or soft, pastel figure. He is God's presence in a very troubled world quite willing to take on the darkest places and ready to fight death with all the love in him in order to rescue his people.

"I AM the Good Shepherd...the Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep. These opening words are why this text lives within the season of Easter. It is not merely 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' to quote one hymn that we meet, but rather the God-Man whose love for us is so far beyond comprehension that he is willing to join death in order to bring life, and fight to the death to wrench us out of harms control. Bishop Robert Barron commented, "Imagine the difference between human beings and sheep; and now multiply that difference infinitely. That would give you some idea of the difference between God and humanity. God is willing to lay down his life for the likes of us."

The Gospel of John tells of a great contrast today. Anyone hearing Jesus speak would have understood the blunt reference to Ezekiel where Israel has suffered at the hands of weak leadership. God speaks telling the people he will be their shepherd and remove the faults and duplicity of those who purport to be protectors. This parable is a response to Chapter 9 where a man born blind has been healed, not by his appointed caregivers, but by Jesus. The man has been placed outside the precincts of the Holy place due to his faulty physical condition. Jesus heals him and then the debate starts about whose fault it is—him or his parents. Blah, blah, blah. Rather than celebrate the overcoming of a broken body, there is the nonsense of blame and accusation which is the bastion of those who cannot see grace at work. The mire in which the shepherds play is countered by

Jesus, who is the act of grace which trumps all scattering and divisiveness. So, we come to the Gospel of the Good Shepherd who like Psalm 23 (appointed for MP today) and Ezekiel offers what false religion cannot offer—healing, restoration, grace, and new life. Jesus counters the Pharisees both then and among us now by leading his people through death to life!

There are far too many thieves and robbers, false and fractured voices in our culture and world whose activity diminishes hope. They show up in cities like Indianapolis and Boulder and multiple places we can name and with whom with suffer. They are heard hawking illusive and misguided promises that cause people to become lost and confused. Hirelings abound and they are not worthy of our time let alone our loyalty, yet on occasion we too fall prey and need rescuing.

I am the Good Shepherd...I know my own...I lay down my life for my sheep” is in direct contrast to the image of the hireling for whom a relationship is a matter of utility and economics. And at least for me, it calls forth an honest appraisal about where I place my trust and well-being. What sorts of relationships have the power or potential to create trust in us? We must confess that we are not much of an agrarian society and images like shepherds and sheep and bandits may feel a bit distant. We might be more inclined to say, “I have an account with Obamacare therefore I will not worry”, “I have 1,000 friends on Facebook, I will not be alone”, or “my economic recovery check has arrived, I am set”. The unsettling truth is we live in a culture and time when real intimacy and deep connections are hard to find and even more challenging to maintain. We are offered the capacity to find just the right “soul mate” by entering our personal data on a dating site and then awaiting a response. It is likely that you, too, could name off any number of shallow substitutes for what you most deeply desire. They are no match for the threats that take away our hope.

A Gallup poll run a few years ago asked thousands of respondents their attitudes toward life. In the top 4 were fear and being alone. Perhaps it is that we worry if or truest selves were really known, then we would not find companionship and belonging. Louise Penny, a Canadian novelist, has written a series of mystery stories centered in a small town in Quebec, Three Pines. The inhabitants are a striking mix of personalities and histories. The protagonist in each novel is the Chief Inspector of Homicide for the Surete, (the Canadian FBI) Armand Gamache. He is part detective, part psychologist, and deeply human. He is a person you would want to know. Always the teacher, in one scene he instructs his second in command to look deeply into each person he encounters during investigations. That character, Jean Guy, suggests that they should be more focused on events and figures; on circumstances and DNA; “just the facts”. “Why” he asks, “should we be concerned about the inner workings of peoples’ hearts? What has this to do with our finding the truth?” Gamache replies, “**Because it is our secrets that make us ill!**” Perhaps it is our fear of being known fully that leads us to believe that there is no one who will love us, hold us, or make a place in their lives for us, IF they really know who we are. And many have had adequate experience in a shallow world to confirm that fear. We are called to be a different people; a redeemed community, because we have a Lord who is the ironic opposite, and whose love and acceptance is not bound by our fears or standards.

“I am the Good Shepherd...I know my own”. This text does not say, “I will know or come to know and accept”. I already know you with all that you carry, and all that keeps you awake at night, and that you allow to separate you from trusting in me, AND I have decided you are mine and worth laying down my own life to defeat what frightens you. Can you say, IRONY?! There is tremendous freedom in being known fully, accepted fully, being given the opportunity to turn loose of the sin and pain that plagues all of us. And there is equal freedom in being owned to such

an extent that we can offer the same to our compatriots in this world who have too often been fleeced by charlatans and hirelings.

Many, many years ago I attended the requiem of a good friend. It was not an easy day. The parish was very large, the nave more substantial than many a Cathedral, the liturgy and music truly heartening, and the worship a gift of grace. However, the homily offered that day trite was disappointing to say the least. In my immature spirit, I found it quite wanting and was left hurt at the lack. In that moment of pain and frustration God offered something I had not expected. Looking up at the astounding stained glass window over the altar an image exploded into view. It was the risen Christ surrounded by cowering disciples and sundry figures, who were overcome by his Resurrection. But more subtly was the image of death which lay in fear. Its' head was just under the foot of the raised Christ. The image was as if to say that even death lay in death's hold at the visage of God's great love.

St. Clement of Alexandria in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century said, "In our sickness we need a saviour, in our wanderings a guide, in our blindness someone to show us the light, in our thirst the fountain of living water which quenches... We dead people need life, we sheep need a shepherd, we children need a teacher, the whole world needs Jesus!"

I am the Good Shepherd is Gospel, that is good news. It is part of the promise of Easter, because it tells us of the outcome the resurrection; God is FOR US, and now offers a relationship not marked by what we bring to Him, but what we mean to him. This entire section of John is characterized by one thing—Love. Amen.+