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## Easter 4 Series C 2017

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## Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 7

*There are some images of Christ which are most precious to Christians. Chief among these is the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. Some of the earliest depictions of Jesus of which we know are of Christ the Good Shepherd. The picture on the right comes from the ceiling of the catacomb of Callixtus in Rome. Some date it to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century but most to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Notice that this is not the bearded Jesus we are most used to seeing, but a beardless Roman Jesus carrying a Lamb on his shoulders.*

*The imagery comes from a number of places in the Bible: Psalm 23, the parable of the lost sheep, but most importantly from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel in which Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. When he does so, it seems he was tapping into an image which was important to the people of his day as well as the people of our day. The Jewish believers also cherished the notion that God was their shepherd (see Ezekiel 34).*



*There are a few things about shepherds and sheep that a preacher will want to keep in mind. For this I am much in debt to Philip Keller who wrote a marvelous little devotional book entitled “A Shepherd Looks at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm” If you have not read this, you might want to lay your hands on a copy. It is published by Zondervan and my copy has an ISBN of 0-310-21435-1.*

*Some of the things that I found interesting are:*

- 1. Sheep are not dumb animals as they are frequently depicted. They are in fact pretty smart. But they cannot see very well. So they often will not be aware that a gate is open. The shepherd will have to physically grab one of them, lift them through the gate before the flock will enter.*
- 2. Sheep can hear quite well – able to identify the voice of a shepherd. Hence God does not say to us, “see this and live” but instead he says “hear this and live.” The preached word is a “heard” experience (pardon the pun). This actually makes sense for humanity as well. Vision is the most tenuous of our senses. I remember what an old nurse once told me that the sense of hearing is the last thing to go. The person lying on that bed seemingly inert may not be able to control a muscle in order to respond to you, but they can still hear you.*
- 3. Sheep need a fair amount of care – they need still waters and green pastures and it takes the consistent care of a shepherd to bring them to these places. Sheep will drown in running water, they will graze a pasture to the roots if left in one place consistently. They also are too indiscriminate in what they eat, a shepherd constantly has to be looking out*

*for poisonous plants. Nightshade is a particular problem for sheep. Most animals know not to eat it, but they don't seem to be aware of its poisonous nature.*

4. *Sheep are ungulates: that means they have multiple stomachs which are used to digest the cellulose that most other mammals, including humans, cannot digest. This is a very gaseous process and a sheep that lies down improperly will be "cast" or "cast down." This means that the gasses in their stomachs have built up in their abdomen and they literally cannot get up. They roll on their backs with their feet in the air. Such a sheep is vulnerable to predators. (If you are familiar with cattle who have the same sort of digestive system, this is called "bloating") This means a shepherd must constantly count his sheep and be aware of how many there are ("if you have 99 and lose one" – she probably laid down wrong and is just over the knoll and cannot get up.)*

*There is much more that you could find. A good preacher, even if he is in a city where people have never seen a sheep will want to sound a little like a shepherd today. In fact, that is what Pastor means.*

*We wondered what was the traction of the good shepherd imagery. If we read it aloud, people will close their eyes and assert that this is the good stuff of the Bible. But what are they hearing and what is good?*

*Are we functionally deists? Do we act, think, and live our lives as if God was absent? Does this Sunday challenge that? Why do we even need a shepherd? The rains come from the forces of nature lifting water from the sea through evaporation, the winds gather the clouds, and, if conditions are right, it rains. There is no need to appeal to a shepherd in the midst of drought. We need technology. I am my own shepherd.*

*But this Sunday asserts that Jesus is right here, caring for, shepherding, helping us. We can all confess this, but I think that most of us are functionally denying it by the way we conduct our lives and the way we think our way through those lives. God is sitting on a throne far away and prayer is long distance calling.*

*Do we need to appeal to the fact that there are forces which herd us all the time, and many of them are malevolent? The forces of technology, media, the world, economy, society, and much more often are very involved in shaping us and directing us. Madison Avenue is all about getting me to open my wallet and spend money. It is attempting to lead me to do something. in that is a shepherd.*

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Power and mercy combine here in the ascription, both are necessary for this image. The shepherd must have power to combat our foes, but he also must temper that power with mercy. There are nasty bears and lions out there who would devour the sheep and they need a strong shepherd who can defend them and beat back the beasties. On the other hand, his hands must also be capable of gentleness. His flock will need their wounds bound, their lambs kept, their aged nursed.*

*He has wakened from death the Shepherd of His sheep. Notice the tense: God has wakened. The shepherding role of Jesus is right now, not a future event nor a past event. We have in this Eastertide been returning to the question of what Jesus is doing right now. This Sunday gives us the most obvious answer – Jesus is shepherding us. We are talking about being the sheep of Jesus right now. This of course demands that we think about how it is that Jesus shepherds us right now. There is no room for the distant occupant of a heavenly throne who is above the fray of the work-a-day world. This shepherd is on the hillsides with this sheep. What do you think that means for us?*

*In the prayer we also beseech God for the Spirit. We are at the midpoint of the Easter season, but already the eyes are being cast forward to the other end of the season, we are anticipating the Pentecost event. The sheep can hear but they must recognize the shepherd's voice. That recognition, that opening of mind and heart to the work of Christ is the arena of the Spirit's good work. I have heard it said that if Lutherans had just spoken of the Holy Spirit as we believed about him there would never have been any need for a Pentecostal or Charismatic movement. Luther had a very active and powerful doctrine of the Spirit. That belongs in our vocabulary as we talk of the work of God.*

*Three years ago we spent some time wondering what does the voice of Jesus sound like. We thought it would be gentle. Jesus can be loud, but his is a gentle voice, not a forcing voice, not a voice which denies our ability to deny him. He can be loud, and sometimes in our lives he has to shout in order to be heard.*

*The preacher also needs to ask about what role Scripture plays here. Too often North American Christians, in a well-intentioned opposition to a secular modernism, have turned the Bible into a sort of idol. The Bible is not the end or object of our faith. Jesus is the one to whom Scripture bears witness and at the same time, it is also his voice to us. Don't over simplify this, as if God has simply dropped a manual from heaven and we are supposed to read it. Scripture is God's love letter to us. It is a living voice, much like having a friend in the room with you. The way Scripture speaks to us is very different than a textbook or something like that.*

*Ultimately, this recognition of Jesus' voice is the work of the Spirit. I think sometimes we have created a fear in people when we talk about this. It is not that Jesus will talk to us with some inner voice or some paranormal experience, or at least that is not required. I think we want to give our folks confidence in this regard. Your people know the voice of Jesus, but they may be afraid that they won't recognize him. They should not be afraid, he has already called to them.*

*When we use the phrase “Jesus talks to me” that often causes people to question our mental stability. As sacramental Christians we do assert that God is talking to us through these Words and Sacraments. Should we be more comfortable with saying that this is the voice of God we are hearing in this? Do we err by conceding the conversation to the schwärmer? Have we lost something when we don’t refer to these sacramental acts as the very voice of God?*

*The preacher will want to remember that Jesus has called us by name (baptism) and leads us. The work of the Savior in our lives is depicted here as very personal and very attentive, shepherd-like. He is actively engaged in our day to day lives. He is not some rancher who turns the cattle loose on the range and then rounds them up in the fall. He is engaged in the life of his people on a regular basis. He is leading us today. The prayer is that we would follow him.*

## **Readings**

*Acts 2:42-47 This reading picks up immediately after last week’s first reading. I have included the final verses of that reading for you.*

*<sup>40</sup> And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” <sup>41</sup> So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

*<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

*This passage has been the subject of intense scrutiny by people. The intense scrutiny of Scripture is a good thing, but sometimes it is the occasion for agendas and preconceptions to be imposed upon it. The study of this passage has lent itself to that. What is often forgotten and I think is important to remember is that Luke is often giving us a description of what happened and not necessarily a prescription of what was supposed to happen or what is supposed to happen in our own circumstances.*

*It is fine to say that we are supposed to dedicate ourselves to the teaching of the Apostles. Prayer and the breaking of bread (communion) seem also to be healthy things to exhort one another to do. But in verse 44-45 we run into a communal sort of lifestyle. This seems to have been something of a disaster for the Jerusalem Christian community, perhaps leading to the acute famine which occasioned Paul’s third missionary journey and caused considerable suffering among the early Christian Jewish community. Paul went out to raise funds to feed the Christians*

*of Jerusalem who seem to have been starving. Was this famine especially acute because the commune did not turn out to be a viable economic model? I am not the first to suggest this. But I am also sensitive to the charge that I and those who have also said this are just being capitalists, reading our own predilections into the text. That also has been suggested.*

*There is another way to think about this too, not as a generalized communal requirement, but an invitation which some followed. The medieval Christians seem to have thought this way as indeed some still do today. The foundation of several monastic orders and their phenomenal growth was patterned after this description. If you know anyone who is a Franciscan or a Dominican, this passage is really important for the foundation of those orders. They don't say all should do this, indeed, they understand that is not sustainable as a way of life. But they think it is important that the Christian community include some who live this way.*

*Of course everyone in North America is looking for the key to the last verse. What is it that caused them to grow? The truth is that Christianity in North America is not growing, at least not generally. It might have spots or corners in which it is flourishing and growing, but this is not generally the case. Often when we look a little deeper at the growing congregations we find that they are a collection of disaffected members from other parishes. It is not real growth but a paper shuffle. What did these first Christians do right that we are not doing?*

*But that is really the wrong question. Is it ever what we do? It would seem that we need to ask what God is doing in Acts and what is he doing here in this time and place and why is that different? I don't have the answers to this, but I am uncomfortable with any attempt to say that we can manipulate the situation and force God to grow the church if we just act a certain way. I hear voices which would say: If we have the right building, right programs, and the proper parking facility, if we worship in this or that style, if we operate this program or if we even just believe hard enough or the right doctrine, then the Church will grow. If we adopt this worship style or re-organize the parish into small groups, then the church will grow. All this seems to be paying attention to the wrong person. These may be very good things to do. I think that they are important questions but ultimately the growth of the Church is in God's hands, not my hands. He cannot be manipulated. Will we never grow until we realize that and put that truth into practice? Or is that just another form of the manipulation?*

## Psalm 23

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

<sup>3</sup> He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.

*What does one say here? I have preached this on so many funerals I just about don't need to prep a sermon on this one. All you need to do is read a verse, talk about it, read a verse talk about it, and you have a sermon. You might find it really interesting to read the psalm with a heavy emphasis on the pronouns, it sounds and comes across very differently when you do that. "The LORD is **my** shepherd..."*

*The psalm has a strong Easter message, "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" and fearing no evil even in the valley of the shadow of death have some really excellent Easter content.*

*I Peter 2:19-25 We have jumped here, the first 18 verses of chapter include some familiar words which show up in other places in our pericope system. But the preacher will want to take them into account. I have included several verses leading up to our reading because they significantly affect the meaning of the passage we are considering.*

*<sup>13</sup> Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup> or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. <sup>15</sup> For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. <sup>16</sup> Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. <sup>17</sup> Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

*<sup>18</sup> Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. <sup>19</sup> For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup> For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.*

*<sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup> When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten,*

but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

*I think this passage has been taken out of sequence because of the last verse here which fits to the theme of the day.*

*In today's age when every wrong is greeted with a law suit or some other forms of vengeance, Peter's message is decidedly countercultural. This is even more so when we consider the verses leading up to this. Submission and obedience are not exactly popular concepts today. Of course, as the tapes and messages of the young people who were on the sinking ferry in Korea are made public, obedience and submission to authority have taken a serious hit. Korean culture strongly values authority and the submission of individuals to that authority. When the captain and crew of the vessel said "Don't move!" the obedient high school students remained in the cabins which became their tombs. Do we take from this the idea that submission and obedience is a bad thing? Many have used such examples to advocate for a radical liberty of the individual. But this has usually been an excuse for all manner of sinful behaviors. Peter seems to be addressing that in the passage which is in the italicized portion of the text above. There he writes that our freedom should not be a cover for sin. Our freedom is the freedom to live the life of God's goodness.*

*More commonly, Peter's admonition is interpreted by many as a form of weakness, as if he were advocating that we be a doormat of sorts. The world does not value this sort of meekness, it finds it a weakness, but the Christian notices that this is actually a much greater strength. Jesus conquered all when he submitted to the cross. When we strike back we are reduced to the level of the one who oppresses us. It is only the strong who can bear suffering this way, only the one who is strong in Christ's strength, demonstrated in the cross.*

*Peter's argument seems to be that to suffer for doing good is not an occasion for self-centered pity; but an occasion for the strength and the grace of God to be revealed in the person. When we suffer unjustly and endure, this is the grace of God at work. Being in the field of education, I am convinced that this is not a value of Americans. For most of the students that I see, even just suffering, getting a paper docked because it is turned in late or sloppily done, is an occasion for much complaining.*

*Peter is calling on us to think very differently about our suffering. Our salvation was accomplished through suffering, suffering which was patiently and willingly born for the sins of the whole world. Our lives, which are connected to his life, will naturally reflect his approach to suffering. Suffering is a gracious moment in our lives. Are we big enough to understand and live that way? It is an easy thing to consider in the abstract comfort of our study, but what about when it really happens, when our salary gets cut, or someone unfairly accuses us, or when someone storms out of the congregation hurling insults at us, even though we know that they are really just frustrated at what they will find at home? How do we react when that happens? Do we*



*look “Jesus-like” in our suffering or do we assume the defensive and score settling posture of the world?*

*Some years ago I was in India, and I was given to visit a number of places where the IELC is working. At a girls’ school in Ambur I was literally mobbed by hundreds of young girls whose smiles and songs were absolutely infectious and amazing. Doubly so when I looked around and saw the difficult conditions in which they lived. These were young girls who were sent from their rural villages to live in what was a crude dormitory so they could have a chance to go to school. Their shower was a bucket and a cup to pour water over their head, their chapel was so small they had to worship in shifts. There wasn’t a blade of grass on their playground, but they were happy, so happy to be there. I think of some of the students my wife taught who were incensed at the idea that they might not be able to play middle school basketball because they are failing a class. Everything is handed to them and they still are not happy and they are not motivated to do well. I was in Church early in the morning near another Indian school and I saw these girls streaming in to pray; it was exam day. They wanted to do well and knew that Jesus was there to help them do well. It was really impressive, humbling, and convicting to watch them kneel and pray before dashing out to their exams.*

John 10: 1-10

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.”<sup>2</sup> But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.<sup>3</sup> To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.<sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.<sup>5</sup> A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”<sup>6</sup> This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup> So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.”<sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.<sup>9</sup> I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

*Jesus seems to use two images here. The second paragraph is not really an explanation of the first, but it seems to be a separate attempt to communicate the same “it.” The real question is the identification of the “it” which lies at the center of both illustrations: Jesus as a properly authorized shepherd and Jesus as a door.*

*Jesus seems to be making an exclusive claim. Is Jesus saying that he alone is the way, the truth, and the life? Is this in concord with Peter’s statement in Acts in which he says that no other name under heaven is given by which we may be saved? Is Jesus really making a first commandment statement about himself here? I think so.*

*I think we also want to ask ourselves just who is this thief and robber. And what does it mean that this thief and robber comes to kill and destroy? Is this what happens when anyone defines life as something other than the relationship with Christ in which God saves me from sin, death and devil? Thus we might wonder if the thief is the therapist who tells me that if I just let go of my guilt then I can really be happy. Is the robber the little voice in my own head that tells me that I will be happy if I just own this....? Is the one who takes and destroys life the one who gets me to focus so exclusively on my own health that I forget about God completely? Is it the music in church in which “I” is the consistent subject of all the verbs and not God? Or is it much simpler than that. Is the thief simply the person who gives me the most? Oprah used to occasionally give millions of dollars away, she looks benevolent and life giving, but is she? Indeed she may be! I cannot see into her heart and certainly, even if it is not a Christian motivated event, Jesus can even use the pagans to do good deeds. But in the final analysis, it is the relationship with Christ in which life is given. Does the gift lead to that? If it doesn’t and if it distracts from that, is this the definition of a thief? Luther asserted that the pope and his hierarchy were the wolves in the fifteenth century. I don’t know if we would continue to say that or not, perhaps we should. In so far as they would ever distract anyone away from a trust in Jesus I think we need to be ready to still say that, no matter how genial the current pontiff is.*

*Augustine said that we can only enjoy God as good, everything else is an instrument through which we approach that goodness, and hence it is “used.” Even people. As a wise old parishioner of mine once said, “If you take “God” out of Good all you have left is O.”*

*I really like this text. First of all because the disciples did not get it, so Jesus tried again. You could preach a whole sermon on the first words of verse 7 where it says that Jesus tried again. He just doesn’t give up on us because we are dense. I am very glad of that. You could even take this back to the Garden of Eden – God calling the man and woman from the trees and bushes behind which they were hiding. They had broken his creation, but he will communicate with them and call them to believe in his salvation plan which he was already unfolding in them.*

*Jesus meant the door thing much more literally than we usually think. The Shepherd would often have an enclosure in which the sheep were kept and the shepherd would sleep across the entrance. He literally was the door! Jesus is the faithful and good door. The sheep pass in and out in safety under his watchful gaze. Those who seek the sheep through any other means are thieves and scoundrels who mean the sheep no good. They come to kill and destroy the flock. Jesus is at the door, he is watching out for you.*

*The two paragraphs here use different images to say much the same thing, but they at first blush seem to be quite different. In the first paragraph Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd, he is the real shepherd who enters through the gate, the sheep recognize his voice and they follow him. This seems to be focused more on the idea that the sheep will recognize the shepherd who cares for them. The relationship we call faith is built by the loving care of Christ.*

*The disciples don’t get this, so Jesus goes a little more radical, a little more strange. Now, in the second metaphor, he is the door itself. As we noted above, this could mean that he is the one who*

*lies across the doorway, physically sleeping in the opening to the sheep fold. Where the first image posited that the sheep recognize the shepherd but one could imagine that they might follow another, this second image puts Jesus into a somewhat stronger image. The other, is likened to someone who crawls over the wall, the thief and robber. Only Jesus is the proper avenue to the salvation which God intends.*

*If you follow the trajectory of the logic, Jesus seems to be building toward the conclusion that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through him. He is, in the words of John 1:18, the exegesis of the Father.*

*In past attempts to preach on this text the Tuesday evening group has wondered what image Jesus would use if he were walking the technological, educational, business, and other paths which our people are walking today. After all, we are not farmers who have much experience with sheep. Can we imagine just how would Jesus express this to us who have never seen a sheep today? Here are a few thoughts we had. Can you add to this list?*

- A. I am the operating system of our computer? (Although, "I am the Bill Gates" just doesn't sound right to me!)*
- B. I am the Virus Protection? (Mine surely is not very effective sometimes, but then again Jesus also spoke of less than effective shepherds.)*
- C. I am the firewall who stands between you and the outside world of malware and spyware which are trying to devour your bank account.*
- D. I am the global positioning system – you are never lost when I am in the car with you*
- E. I am the ISP who manages your email for you. It is the malicious spyware that tries to get you to open the attachment that will infect your machine.*
- F. I am social security – in your day of weakness I am there for you. But will it be there for all of us?*
- G. I am the bus driver in the big yellow bus, get on and I will bring you to school*
- H. I am the teacher, when the teacher calls children in from the playground, they come. When the intruder threatens, the teacher gets them to safety. Their ignorance is taken care of by the teaching and their needs are addressed by the care of their teacher. This is more true in the second semester than the first – they have heard that voice enough. In a disaster, it is not the students who normally go looking for the teacher but it is the teacher who seeks out the students. When there is a fire, the teacher is out there counting heads and looking for faces to make sure that everyone got out.*
- I. I am the good German shepherd who recognizes his owner might be another good metaphor of this. If you have ever had a dog who is protecting you, you know that this is a really interesting experience. He is always there, watching at your side.*

*This is not just a game. The person who walks through our doors from the larger culture and hears us speaking of shepherds and sheep may or may not think we are insane, but even if they can understand the metaphor, does it actually speak to them? They can intellectually get what we mean, but does this metaphor speak to their heart anymore? I really doubt it. Preachers will need to find a way to do that. Metaphors are the most important tools of that process.*

*Today's text has a real danger if we don't get this right. What of the unbaptized or the baptized who have not darkened the door of church for years. How do they recognize the voice? Finally this is the work of the Spirit, but he uses preachers.*

## **Law**

1. I am a sheep. This is not a bad thing, but it does mean some things about me. I don't see real well, so I can sometimes miss the danger which is right in front of me. I have serious limitations on my ability to discern. I also can be rendered helpless rather quickly. I am dependent upon the caring love of a shepherd or I will succumb, perhaps to something as stupid as gas.
2. All we like sheep have gone astray – one of the more popular OT passages for quoting in the NT. The trick is to put some flesh on this one. Just how have we gone astray? Have we wandered from the rich grass of God's word? Have sought the excitement of some sin's turbulent waters? Do we see the lost-ness of our condition in the suffering of our lives? Do we admit that most sheep get lost one blade of grass at a time, nibbling their way to isolation and vulnerability? Do we notice that the people who are in our pews are actually those who heard the voice of the shepherd and came out this day? Are they actually the found ones? How do we apply this Biblical truth?
3. We have enemies – the sheep of God's fold are not in a vacuum. There are those who crawl over the wall and would do us evil. It is critical that we recognize the true shepherd and follow only him. There are those who would lead us to danger and death.
4. There are not multiple paths to the same place. As much as our culture would like us to think that everything is relative and we can be eclectic in our religion, the truth is that there are right and wrongs here and to those right and wrongs are terrible and eternal consequences.
5. For many of us, this raises the question of how shall I recognize the voice of Jesus. If he is so important to me, how can I know that I am listening to his voice? What if he comes and I miss it?

## **Gospel**

1. My shepherd has risen from the dead and he cares for the sheep. They are precious to him. His gentle care is not just a last day sort of thing, but an everyday sort of thing. Sheep need this care, and in Christ they find this care.
2. My failure to see is compensated by the fact that my shepherd uses the sense which I do have. He calls me, having spoken gently to me while he cared for me, I know his voice. I trust his voice. The one who speaks thus to me is my Good Shepherd.
3. The voice of the shepherd is not hard to recognize. It is in the very love which I need. I hear him in the gentle forgiveness, the love of a neighbor, the Word which comforts my soul. His voice is not discerned in the timbre or tone, but in the actions which he has done in my life.
4. The shepherd has conquered my most implacable foes of sin, death, and Devil. His resurrection is proof that the last of these has been overcome and now he has risen from the dead for the purpose of protecting me from their assault.
5. My blindness and inability to find the right path is not the problem it might seem. The shepherd has sought me out, placed me on his shoulders and carried me on the path I cannot find. It is true that there are no other paths which bring me to heaven, but I don't have to fret about finding the right one, he leads me and when I cannot follow him because I have died, he carries me to that place.

#### Sermon Themes:

1. It's Good to Be a Sheep! (Psalm and Gospel – that the Lord Jesus would call his sheep to faithful confidence and trust in him – Jesus is watching out for us!)

It is true that sheep are not the most glamorous animals, left on their own they can get into a fair amount of trouble. These sheep, however, have one wonderful asset, a great Good Shepherd. Having risen from the dead, Jesus is now, today, caring for us and leading us in the safety of the eternal life he has given us. No foe can overcome him. He has met them all in terrible conflict and he has prevailed. We are completely safe under his care. Even if I find that my path passes through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Jesus is with me. He is God's rod and staff, to ward off the enemy, even the enemy within me.

This sermon will want to work off the humble position of a sheep. The law is really that we are rather silly animals when it comes right down to it. Thinking that we are going to solve our own problems is not really very smart. A quick glance at the disasters that have attended human attempt to solve our problems should be enough to disabuse us. When we turn to the spiritual realm, we are waltzing through a dangerous spiritual world and we haven't got even a clue just how dangerous it really is. We eat our grass and blunder along. There are large wolves watching from the heights. All the while there is a Good

Shepherd named Jesus who is watching out for us. This is a very good arrangement. You don't want to change a thing about it, but to encourage your folks and help them offer up the appropriate words of praise and thanksgiving for all this.

2. And Lord added to their number (First reading and Gospel: That the Spirit of God would calm the parishioner's fears for his/her parish and instill a calm, sturdy faith in Christ the Good Shepherd.)

This sermon identifies our human tendency to self-reliance as a problem, the Law of this text. We view our lives and our parishes through a therapeutic lens. If we would just get the formula right, then all would be well. We see it in the folks who believe that if they just take the right supplements, vitamins, and diet then they will never be sick. Our fellowship of faith is often marred by those who insist that we must sing these songs or do these things in order to grow and be healthy.

We can all be for doing good things, but to suggest that my doing is what gives the real live that Jesus offers is taking to ourselves what belongs to God. The text is rather clear here. The disciples of old did some rather odd things, but God added to their numbers. In another generation they would do other things, and subsequent generations would continue to do things, some of them odd, others which conformed more or less to the wisdom of marketing and the world. God added to their number throughout.

Most parishes in the U. S. are not growing, or not keeping pace with the larger population trends. That is a matter of concern and institutionally it may indeed be a problem for many congregations. But Jesus is shepherding his church and he causes it to grow. We cannot imagine that by getting this right or avoiding that problem we will somehow release the floodgates of growth. Jesus added to their number.

That is not an excuse for sinful or foolish behavior. It does not mean that we have no decisions to make. Indeed, it means we can make decisions, but we are blessed to remember, Jesus added to their numbers. They were free to do what God called them to do. God did not lay on them or us the responsibility to add to their numbers. He kept that. He called through them, he used their words and deeds, but Jesus added to their number. Paul could be crabby, Peter put his foot in his mouth regularly, most of the early Christians were not well educated and wise by worldly standards. Their youth programs were not top flight and the organist probably played to slowly once in a while. Jesus added to their numbers.

Jesus is shepherding his flock. Why he is doing what he does in North America these days, I cannot answer, but I can trust him. Jesus added to their number and Jesus adds to the number of Christians today.

3. So Jesus said again to them, and to us! (Gospel: That the Spirit of God would enable the hearer to rejoice in the manifold complexity of Jesus' voice to them – Scripture!)

This sermon will really address the fear that our people have that they will not hear or recognize the voice of the Shepherd. [That fear is real and we need to point such a person to the Jesus who saves, not to some ability they have.](#) We will assure our people that they have indeed heard this voice, it's why they are here today. They have been baptized, they commune at this altar, and they are part of this community. I don't have to convince them of this, in so far as they believe these things to be true, they already are listening to him. This sermon wants to help them deal with some of the difficulties this presents to the person who is already listening to the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who loves the whole flock.

The Bible can be hard to understand sometimes. I personally believe that Leviticus has been the undoing of more well-intentioned attempts to read the whole bible than any other thing. Folks can handle the stories in Genesis and Exodus. The holiness code and building of the tabernacle in the last part of Exodus are tough. And then they hit Leviticus like a brick wall. Reading Leviticus is a little like reading the tax code or your computer owner's manual.

But it isn't just the rules that present a problem for us. It is also the really hard parts. Why do all the Gospels have a different number of women who show up at the tomb on the first Easter? Why does Paul want his enemies to castrate themselves in Galatians 5:12? That seems a little harsh. Why does John list out four days in chapter 1 of his gospel and then tell you that the wedding of Cana was on the third day? Can't he count? I am not saying that they are wrong, but why the differences, why these glitches?

The answer I believe can be seen right in this text and the words of this sermon theme. Because they did not understand, Jesus said it to them again. One of the ways Jesus shepherds us today is through this Bible in which we hear his voice. It is a voice which doesn't always sound the same, and sometimes we understand it better than others. The ancient Church fathers like Augustine and Chrysostom and Basil said that the issues such as the ones I raised in the preceding paragraph were really "wrinkles" in the text. They were intentionally put there by God to make us think. Their reasoning was that if the Bible was easy to understand and we never had to work for it, we would get bored and stop reading. This is God, who understands our minds because he made them, putting a brain-teaser in the Bible so you will stay interested!

I really don't know if that is true or not, but it is a fascinating idea. In any event, the Bible is a complex book with lots of different ways of saying things. It is like that because God wants everyone human being to hear something in there, some still small voice or a roaring lion, in which the voice of this shepherd calls to them. He is so committed to their hearing him, that he will use many authors, in many styles, in many different genres. He

will tell stories, make rules, move men to write letters, record sermons, and have wild visions like Revelation. He does all this because he loves all his people, all his sheep.

This sermon certainly wants your folks to rejoice in the voice of Jesus the good shepherd today, but we also want to inoculate them from the idea that differences in the text somehow undercut its authority or validity. There are folks out there who like to suggest as much. Are they not the thieves and robbers Jesus warns us about? I think too often we have taken the wrong approach to all this and imagined that we had to somehow defend the text of the Bible from these accusations, to make sure that everything “agrees” perfectly in the text. And there is merit to making a defense of Scripture, but if we only do that, we really are letting them define the conversation. What is more, when that is all we do we really make God small in our own minds and a very unimaginative sort of God. The incarnation of Christ means that he uses real human words to talk to us. Don’t be surprised if there are a few things to think about, a wrinkle or two in the text. Don’t let the enemy define the conversation about the text. The manifold complexity of the Bible is nothing short of a witness to God’s overwhelming, shepherding love of people. It is no sign that it is wrong, quite the contrary, it is a sign that God loves all and he will use almost any tool to reach you and every other wandering sheep.

John’s text from a couple of weeks ago might also help – John admitted that he left out a bunch of miracles, but these are written that you might believe and by believing have life in His name.

Another direction this could take us into the Law development which asks whether we alone are the ones who can hear this shepherds voice. What makes us the sheep of the shepherd? Is it not faith? It is the denomination that draws lines at the doors of our churches. Is it really Jesus? Can Jesus call sometimes through faulty preachers and practices? I sure hope so, because otherwise my ministry is doomed!! This probably also has implications then for how we treat the person who is from another Christian tradition. Jesus will use lots of different sorts of voices to call. It is critical that it always is Jesus who calls. I am not suggesting that Buddhism is a viable alternative. At the same time, this sermon might have the worthy implication that Christ is certainly capable of, and his love is large enough to reach into people through many different sorts of ministry and traditions.

I do not mean to suggest that we should be tolerant of error or accepting of heresy. But at the same time, Luther was not really a Lutheran and himself discouraged the use of the name. He always understood himself to be a son of Catholicism. He sought to reform, not start over. Lutheranism as a movement has always found folks who believe in the Gospel and called them kin. The arrogance which thinks that we alone are Christians is often a faith destroying sort of enemy, it posits a very small God and robs us of the gladness the disciples felt in the Acts text.