

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2018
Acts 4:5-12; John 10:11-18

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Images of Strength

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Welcome to one of the many “Good Shepherd Sundays” that punctuate our liturgical years. I admit to occasionally considering these too frequent, especially since we are usually given to talk of dirty, smelly, stupid sheep and how the metaphor isn’t very complimentary to those of us who claim to be a part of Jesus’ herd. While “Good Shepherd Sunday” is really only once each year—on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, Psalm 23 appears a full six times over the course of our three year series of scripture readings.

Nonetheless, I do love the hymns. Isn’t it comforting and invigorating to sing again the words of Psalm 23 and to sing them in various poetic and hymnic versions? Upcoming is “My Shepherd, You Supply My Need,” a paraphrase of the psalm. So is “The King of Love My Shepherd Is,” which we will sing at communion.

These choices, offered by our organist, Mike Powell, all make reference to sheep and shepherd. But those of us who sing/sang the entrance hymn at this/the 8:30 service recognize that not all references to lambs and sheep are solely about us. “At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing.” That’s about the self-giving offering of our Lord that reflects the words of John’s gospel where John the baptizer declares: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” The hymn walks us through communion imagery, using it to preach and teach the resurrection of Easter as well as to call us to faithful living. Here are the final two stanzas:

Easter triumph, Easter joy, this alone can sin destroy!
From sin’s pow’r, Lord, set us free, newborn souls in you to be. Alleluia!

Father, who the crown shall give. Savior, by whose death we live.
Spirit, guide through all our days. Three in One, your name we praise. Alleluia!

It is perhaps time that we review more of the positive side of the lamb and sheep images in scripture. There is much that is enriching about this metaphor that spans both testaments. After all, the symbol is (along with that of a vineyard), among the most frequent metaphors used in the bible for the people of Israel and the people of God.

The use of sheep and shepherd as images in the Hebrew Scriptures reflect the nomadic life that was often the lot of those who worshipped Yahweh. Sheep signified the communal life of the people, constituted a source of food and clothing, and functioned as the primary sacrificial gifts to God. And, of course, I want to focus on that

first significance—the communal life of the people. Still, the lamb as source of food, clothing and sacrifice calls to mind both the Festival of Passover and its offspring, Holy Communion. These are quintessentially holy symbols that have borne sacred significance for century upon century.

The single wandering lamb from Luke’s parable of the lost sheep is not the image here in John 10. Nor does the bible describe sheep as being dirty. Nor is a barefooted white-robed man a realistic depiction of the shepherd, who by the first century was thought of as lower class and religiously unclean. Yet on the wall of the third-century baptismal room in Dura, in among the oldest known frescoes, Christ the shepherd is depicted as leading the sheep to the font. And in Genesis 29, Rachel, one of the matriarchs of ancient Israel, is a shepherd. Not to mention David, the greatest of the ancient kings.

Both kings and mothers of nations are forged in the demanding and difficult crucible of caring for stubborn livestock. So the good shepherd is an amazingly evocative way to speak of our risen Lord, Jesus, the Christ. It is an image of strength. Shepherds are protectors, defenders, warriors if need be, fiercely compassionate and caring healers, guides, and sustainers of those in their flock. They are willing to risk all for the one as well as to protect the entire flock from the one that might threaten it.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care 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. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (vv. 11-16)

The reading from Acts echoes the strength of this image with another—that of a cornerstone, or foundation stone. A cornerstone is the first stone set, at least in ancient times, at the corner of a structure, in order to mark the building’s significance, to set a firm foundation, and to establish an orientation from which all other stones or bricks or blocks will take their cue as they are set. It is a reference point and a fundamental focus of strength. In ancient times, offerings or sacrifices were placed under, on, or in the cornerstone. We now simply place memorabilia there.

I wonder how many of you know where the cornerstone is for this church building. (A show of hands.) You will see it to your left as you exit the old narthex towards the circular drive. It is imbedded in the east wall of Heritage Hall, which was our first sanctuary. I know nothing of what may be in that cornerstone, though there are some here who may remember. (Anyone?)

Instead of “Good Shepherd Sunday” we could equally consider this “Cornerstone Sunday.” I wonder if you can think of hymns that we could have selected to celebrate this other image of strength today? (Anyone?)

How about “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation?” (ELW 645)

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ, our head and cornerstone,
chosen of the Lord and precious, binding all the church in one;
holy Zion’s help forever and our confidence alone.

How about “Built on a Rock?” (ELW 652)

Built on a rock the church shall stand, even when steeples are falling;
crumbled have spires in ev’ry land, bells still are chiming and calling—
calling the young and old to rest, calling the souls of those distressed,
longing for life everlasting.

How about “The Church’s One Foundation?” (ELW 654)

The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
she is his new creation by water and the word.
From heav’n he came and sought her to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

Others? Not as easy as the shepherd thing, is it? But not bad at all. By the way, Peter was quoting Psalm 118:22 in this passage from Acts. Here’s the verse, plus a couple, since they’re so well known:

²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

²³This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

As I reflect on these images of strength in scripture and song, I think too of the source of our soil-based life on this Earth Sunday. It’s in the funeral service that a couple of these metaphors take special liturgical shape.

The earth as source and destiny is brought to the fore in the committal:

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our sister/brother, and we commit her/his body to its resting place; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The good shepherd punctuates both the commendation and the committal. The commendation is phrased in this way:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive her/him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

The committal ends with this:

The God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do God's will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in God's sight; through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever.

This all makes me think that the metaphors before us this morning are all calling us in a certain direction. The good shepherd, the cornerstone, the soil from which God formed us and to which we return in the care of the good shepherd—these all point us towards remembrance. Remembrance of the strength of those who came before. Those who helped to set the cornerstone there on the southeast edge of our first sanctuary. Those who have shepherded us over the years. Those who have turned again to organic compounds in order to nurture new life and new resurrections.

Can we name them aloud? Our founders. Our pastors. Our leaders. Some who have served us well as blessings among us who have returned to the earth and to God.

I add a few: John Harder. Charles Sweet. Marcella Calvert. Penny Pennington. Rev. William Rowen. Rev. Walter and Nona Johnson. [Pause]

[In Blessing] May the God of peace, the great shepherd of the sheep, the chief cornerstone of church and life, continue to make us complete in everything good so that we may do God's will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in God's sight, for the sake of the church, the earth, and all of God's people. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.