

Homily: April 30, 2023
4th Sunday of Easter / Good Shepherd Sunday
26:45 – 37:22

As Sylvia noted in our introduction this morning, we hear today of “Shepherd.” This is Good Shepherd Sunday and we always hear from Chapter 10 of John’s Gospel account, all three years, A, B and C. And today we hear from the first verses of this Shepherd Discourse.

Jesus speaks of himself as “Good Shepherd.” Yes. But he also uses four other descriptors: *Sheepfold, Sheepgate, Gate and Gatekeeper*. When you hear all of those, you begin to wonder, “Okay. Who is? And What?”

Let me share with you a reflection that I found in one of my resources. It was written by an archaeologist in 1960, of an experience he had in 1959 in Iran. He was on a quest and this is how he describes that quest, or the surprise in the midst of that quest. He writes:

Many years ago, I was traveling by donkey from Nishapur, the city of the poet, Omar Kayyam in Eastern Iran, to Sabsevar, a three-days journey to the west. We stopped in a tiny village of mud huts for the night. And when we arose next morning the dry, dusty land was covered with a mantle of beautiful white snow.

As the donkey driver stated firmly that it was impossible for his animals to move while the snow was so deep, there was nothing to do but wait until the snow melted a bit. So all that day we remained in the village.

In the afternoon I set out to see the sights about the village. Not far away, I came to a mound of earth piled up in a large circle, like a crude rampart. And on top of the mound, all around the circle was a heap of dry thorns.

As I stood wondering what this might be, one of the villagers approached me. “Salaam,” I said. “Please tell me what this enclosure is for,” I asked.

“Oh, that is for the sheep,” he replied. “They are brought in here for the night for safety.”

“Good,” I said, “But why have the dry thorns been piled on top of the wall?”

“That,” he replied, “is a protection against wolves. If a wolf tries to break in and attack the sheep, he will knock against the thorns and make a noise, and the shepherd will wake up, and drive off the wolf.”

“That is fine,” I said, “but why does the wolf try to climb over the wall? Here is the entrance to the enclosure; it is open. There is no door or gate to keep out the world; he could easily enter here.”

“Oh no,” said my guide, “you do not understand. That is where the shepherd sleeps, the shepherd is the door.”

And then I understood something that had often puzzled me. It became clear to me why Jesus has in John 10 called himself first the “Door” and then immediately afterwards the “Shepherd.” Since he is the Shepherd, he is also the door.”

My brothers and sisters, the world has never been a safe place for the flock, for Christians. The world invites, century upon century, culture upon culture – that Christians should make accommodations. They should accept the status quo. They should assimilate with the world. The world wants conformity.

In the Acts of the Apostles in Peter's kerygmatic speech, which we began last week – we hear a phrase that can be disturbing. Peter speaks about a *corrupt generation*. "Avoid it," he says. Who was this corrupt generation? For him, it was unbelievers, the unbelieving religious leaders and some of the Judeans who had handed Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified. He said that the world of that time and what it offered was tantalizing – attractive – but it was corrupt. And it is hostile, if a believer does not accept its offerings. Even then, in the First Century.

We then heard today from First Peter. Again, this is as we began last week, a post-baptismal exhortation. And in it, it's clear that the author makes a connection with the suffering servant. And the Suffering Servant here becomes the Shepherd. It makes it clear that those who follow this Shepherd will suffer. This was to newly baptized people. It must have been bracing for them.

But let's return to the Twentieth Century, our archaeologist's insight. Christ is the gate. Christ is the Shepherd. The sheep, for survival, need such a One.

We all know there is great danger in going it alone. Our culture urges us to a very unhealthy individualism. It tells us that "I" (pointing to himself) am the sole arbiter, the one judge of what is right and wrong. Thus, I do not need a Shepherd, nor to be a part of a flock.

There is great danger in that, my brothers and sisters. For we do need a Shepherd. And we need the flock, which we call the Church. Yes. We need to be led to green and fresh pastures. We need to be led beyond the shadow of death. We need the guidance around dangers, crevasses, thorns and protection from the wolves of our own time.

Who are those wolves? Consumerism – Racism – Sexism – Pornography – Despotism – Polarization – Xenophobia – Apathy – and the practice of trying to catch up to the world's view at the expense of the Truth.

We need to rest in the midst of the darkness of life, in the safety of the enclosure whose Gate is the very Shepherd whose voice we trust. We need to heed the call to gather as the flock, so that all may be fed, especially here (gesturing toward the altar).

All this being said, I would urge us all to take some time this week to ponder the great Shepherd's Psalm, Psalm 23. "The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want." Ponder it, line by line. Let it connect to your own life and the life of your domestic church, your home and the life of our parish.

If you want a slightly different version, pull up what we just sang in the Psalm today: *Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears – from death into life*. A poetic version set to song. Pull it up. Read it. Sing it to yourself. And if you don't want anybody to hear, just sing it in your head.

Let the call of the Shepherd drown out the call of the world, a world which – though God created the world good - human beings at times, have corrupted. And would corrupt all Christians, as well.

Take your time. Pray. And ask for the wisdom of good hearing and good insight.