

Sunday, May 8, 2022
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

Revelation 7.9-17; John 10.22-30

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/706714130756354>

(Sermon begins at about 20:40)

“The Good Shepherding of the Lamb of God”

We are still in the Easter season, but as of last week, we exhausted our accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances to his disciples. In the remaining four weeks of Eastertide, our Gospel readings focus on Jesus’ teachings about faith and intimacy with God. Focusing on our relationship with God. How we relate to God and how God through Christ relates to us. And the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Easter always focuses on one of the most well-known and perhaps most beloved images of that relationship: the Good Shepherd. With each year of our lectionary delving into a portion of the Good Shepherd discourse from the Gospel according to John.

I find it interesting that whenever I prepare a sermon, no matter how many times I have preached on a particular theme or particular set of readings, I invariably notice something that I had never noticed before. A detail in a reading jumps out, as if being read for the first time. Or how the whole set of readings for a particular Sunday come together to present an image I never noticed before. That is what happened for me this week, as I contemplated how to preach about the Good Shepherd for the umpteenth time in my career as a priest. As I pondered the readings for today, something jumped out at me that never had in my nearly 17 years of ordained ministry. As I tried to figure out how to approach the story of the Good Shepherd this year, as I tried to come up with a new angle, I noticed that the image of sheep figure prominently in our reading from the Gospel according to John and in the Epistle reading from the Revelation to John. Both books traditionally attributed to the same author: to John, the Beloved Disciple. The Gospel according to John using the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd to his sheep, and the Revelation to John incorporating the image of Christ as the Lamb of God. Both images pointing to answers to the question Jesus is asked as he walks through the Temple: “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (Jn 10.24). You will note that “the Jews gathered around him” asked this question. It is important to recognize that throughout John’s Gospel, when he refers to “the Jews,” he typically is referring to the Jewish authorities.

Prior to the Gospel passage we heard today, Jesus attempts to convey who he is using the image of himself as the Good Shepherd. The Jewish authorities just aren’t getting what he is saying—not unusual. Hence, their question. And yet, Jesus does not directly respond to the question of whether or not he is the Messiah. Sure, Jesus could have said, “Of course I’m the Messiah!” But talk is, as they say, cheap. The people so longed for the coming of the Messiah to liberate them, that they were willing to see potential messiahs around every corner. And there were those who were willing to take advantage of the prevailing cultural and religious angst. As a result, at that time, there were always people running around Jerusalem claiming to be the

Messiah. Rather than give them a direct yes or no answer, Jesus notes that he has made previous attempts to let the people and the Jewish authorities know who he is. He is not willing to make a direct response because he recognizes that the only way to really answer the question is through people's experience of him.

To illustrate this, he returns to the image of himself as the Good Shepherd: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand" (Jn 20.27-28). The bond between sheep and their shepherd—what makes for a truly good shepherd—is experience. How the sheep experience the shepherd. Does he care for them? Does he feed them? Does he protect them? Does he love them? If not, the sheep will not be willing to follow the shepherd. But, if yes, the sheep will come to trust the shepherd, based on their experience of him, and be willing to follow him. They grow to trust the sound of his voice and will follow wherever he leads them. This trust can only be developed through experience over time of who the shepherd really is.

And Jesus has shown them time and again who he is. Through his teachings. Through healing the sick and infirm. Through feeding the multitudes. Through caring for the poor and the marginalized. They have had plenty of opportunities to experience who he is, up close and personal. Everything he has done throughout his public ministry equates to what a truly good shepherd does for his sheep: feeding, caring for, protecting, and loving them. Rather than directly rattling off his credentials, what he has done in his ministry, Jesus uses the image of the Good Shepherd as shorthand for what he has done, for who he is. He is really saying, "if you just look, you have your answer. If you experience what I freely offer, you will know firsthand who I am."

And if all the things a shepherd does for his sheep—which Jesus also has done—is not enough proof, there is one other aspect that Jesus slips into the middle of the Good Shepherd discussion that should be the clincher. His sheep don't just hear his voice. He doesn't just know them. They don't just follow him. On top of all that, Jesus says, "I give them eternal life." That is what distinguishes Jesus as the Messiah from all the other would-be messiahs running around at the time. "I give eternal life."

Of course, in this Easter season we celebrate Christ's Resurrection and the fact that through his death and resurrection he has defeated the bonds of sin and death. That through his actions, we have obtained forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life with him. One of the images for what Christ has accomplished on our behalf is another sheep image. As the Lamb of God, referenced in our Epistle reading. In part of John's vision of the heavenly realm, he sees all the faithful gathered around God seated on the throne. Also present is one referred to as the Lamb, of whom it is written: "the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, [who] will guide them to springs of the water of life" (Rev 7.17). The description of this Lamb being a shepherd. The Good Shepherd.

The Lamb of God is a title for Jesus that is unique to John the Apostle. It is first presented in the Gospel according to John, when John the Baptist "saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (Jn 1.29). This and a subsequent similar proclamation by John the Baptist the next day to two men who would

become Jesus' disciples begins the unfolding of the themes of salvation and redemption, culminating in the sacrificial death of Jesus. Just as, at the time, lambs were sacrificed in the Temple as a means of seeking forgiveness of sins. Jesus' sacrificial death, along with the subsequent resurrection, resulting in the taking away of the sin of the entire world.

St. Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, references Christ's death using similar lamb imagery. Although in this case, he uses a lamb reference that was particularly significant to the Jewish people. He writes, "For our paschal lamb, Christ has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5.7). The paschal lamb referring to the lambs that were sacrificed at the first Passover before the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt. The blood from the sacrifice of the lambs painted on the door lintels, serving as a sign to the angel of death to pass over, to save the lives of, the Hebrews. Allowing them to escape Egypt and thereby gain their freedom. The event commemorated every year at the festival of Passover. Part of that feast being a meal featuring lamb as a reminder of the sacrifice made on behalf of the Jewish people. The Passover meal being Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his crucifixion. Providing the logical connection of Christ's sacrificial death with the sacrificial death of the Passover, or paschal, lamb. And in so doing, bringing to mind how through his own sacrifice, Christ has provided for our liberation and new life, just as the Hebrews were led to freedom and new life in the exodus.

The Revelation to John contains nearly 30 references to a lamb which ultimately delivers victory and salvation reminiscent of that achieved by the Risen Christ. Our reading for today providing a clear connection of the image of the Lamb of God with Jesus Christ himself. The connection of the Lamb of God with the Good Shepherd himself. The Lamb of God—the one sacrificed to take away the sin of the world—now in the heavenly realm, having provided eternal life for all.

This side of the Resurrection, we have the benefit of being able to look back across the events of salvation history and see how images of lambs and shepherds come together in the person of Jesus Christ. The use of sacrificial lambs at the first Passover to insure the life and liberation of God's people. The use of lambs as sacrificial offerings for the atonement of sins in Temple worship. These images coming together in Jesus Christ as the Paschal Lamb, as the Lamb of God, whose death was the sacrificial means of forgiveness, salvation, liberation, and eternal life for God's people. The ultimate act of love by the Good Shepherd, giving of himself, including his life, for his flock. So that we might have the greatest gift of all: eternal life spent in the presence of the Lamb of God, who has been, and always will be, our Good Shepherd.