

If it is The Fourth Sunday of Easter...  
It is Good Shepherd Sunday!

Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd.” All of us probably carry an abiding image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I remember a specific painting I knew as a child and of course since my first church was called Good Shepherd, I received several ‘Jesus as the Good Shepherd’ in everything from icons to statuettes. Typically these images feature Jesus as the kind and gentle shepherd cradling a wayward sheep in his arms or across his shoulders as he returns it to safety. When I was a child I found this to be a very soft and comforting image. As I grew up and began to put away childish things, I began to understand the image of the Good Shepherd in a whole new way.

Gone was the image in my mind’s eye of Jesus in his soft pink cloak cradling the fuzzy little lamb. I pictured the sometimes dry and dangerous landscape of adult life and gave thanks that Jesus, this Good Shepherd of ours, is the one who guides and guards us around life’s jagged rocks, hungry wolves, and steep cliffs.

The countryside around Jerusalem from which Jesus would have drawn his images was arid and often hazardous. The rocky soil was a haven for hungry wolves and a trap for unsteady sheep grazing near cliffs that dropped off sharply into the Dead Sea below.

Good shepherds were vigilant, courageous, tender, and tough. Most important of all, the shepherd had to intentionally work at knowing his sheep, and making sure that they knew him. The shepherd’s voice is what shaped, nurtured, and protected the flock. It was the shepherd’s voice that drew the lost, the scared, and the wounded back home.<sup>[1]</sup> Jesus tells us that he is the shepherd and his sheep will listen to his voice.

We all grow up with a variety of voices which shape our lives. Like the Good Shepherd, our parents, grandparents, godparents, teachers, and favorite neighbors have “tended” us—they have touched us, taught us, led and comforted us. They have mentored us and shown us that we matter and they have prepared us for life.

All of them have given us the particular gifts of memory and presence—the gifts of caring for us in ways that affirmed us and they reminded us that who we are in this world matters.

Those who care most deeply for us always want what is best for us. They cry with us when our hearts are broken, they are not afraid to tell us difficult truths when we’ve lost our way, and they are willing to stand as a bulwark between us and present danger if they see that we are at risk.

Being loved in this way has the effect of “calling us home.” Love of this kind does not spare us from the fact that our choices in life have consequences. Not just for us, but for our entire community.

As you know, growing up in the south we learn that as we grow we are understood as a reflection of the values and character of those who tended and raised us. I know when my mother was particularly upset with my behavior she would say: “I did not raise you to act like that!” What kind of things did you hear? While it doesn’t always feel like it at the time, the intent of words like these is to remind us that we are important, that people care about us and that our lives have significance. Those who love us the most will teach us that there is accountability for the choices we make with our lives.

The Good Shepherd’s voice is inviting, compelling, affirming, and convicting. This is the voice that issues straight from the heart of God. Jesus tells us: “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.”

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<sup>[1]</sup> Susan R. Andrews in “Lectionary Homiletics”

We are Jesus' sheep and we are invited to reflect Jesus' goodness in the world so that others may also know this love. We do this by living lives that shine with Jesus' values such as love of neighbor, forgiveness, mercy and compassion.

The Good Shepherd's voice is the one that comforts and restores. We can be sure that the Good Shepherd does not accuse us, threaten us or violate us to bend us to his will when we go astray. And there is nowhere in creation that we can become so lost that God cannot find us and call us home. This voice of love comes to us, wherever we are, and calls us by name. Jesus calls us into a life of love and abundance with God, and desires nothing more than that we may hear his voice and enter into that abundant life. Not a life free of peril, danger, or pain, but a life lived without fear and measured by endless grace.

Happy Easter, Stephanie+