## "The Lord is my Good Shepherd"

We live in the country and some in this congregation have farms or work in agricultural settings. Yet, we are not in agriculture the way the people of first century Palestine were. They were subsistence farmers. These people were intimate with the land on a very elemental level. They were knowledgeable about livestock especially sheep, goats and animals that could graze on the hilly lands of their country. They also looked to the waters for food whether it was the River Jordan, the Sea of Galilee, or the Mediterranean Sea.

Thus, it is not surprising that the Bible is full of agricultural symbols and metaphors. The most persistent is shepherding. It is interesting because shepherds were not at the top of the social ladder. They were not the most respected of laborers. Neither, as some people have stated, were they considered to be lowlifes, criminals, or vagrants. Shepherding was a familiar job and sheep were a familiar sight. If you want an effective metaphor, it better be something that people recognize.

The shepherd's role involved multiple tasks. They tended to the sheep's needs for food, water, guidance, and protection. Sheep are grazers. They eat grass and look for nice, delicious clumps. When eating they focus their heads on the ground around them. They are not on the lookout for hazards or predators. While they tend to move in flocks they can also wander away from the flock in search of a tasty morsel. With their heads down they are not aware of what is going on around them. It is easy for a sheep to get detached from the flock making it easy prey for a wolf.

Additionally, they need water which is not plentiful in Palestine. Sheep rely on their shepherd to make sure that they have watering holes available for their needs. The shepherd guides the sheep toward grass and water as the psalm says.

The shepherd also keeps the flock together and predators at bay. Even when the flock stays together, it is not like they are a fearsome bunch. A flock of sheep might trample one, but they otherwise do not seem to have great defensive skills. I wonder how they survived in the wild before domestication.

One parishioner told me that her neighbor's sheep sometimes fall prey to coyotes. However, they have a donkey that serves both as an early warning system for the sheep, and a defender. The coyotes do not want to tussle with the donkey if they can avoid it. Those hooves are dangerous.

Sheep, make a nice stand in for human beings. Humans are social animals, and we tend to live in groups. We often feel the need for guidance. We seek out sustenance. We yearn for protection from predators and the whims of nature. We seek a shepherd to lead us, guide us, care for us, and protect us.

With all that the modern world has given us we have not supplanted the shepherd. Despite the subtitle of the movie "Dr. Strangelove" we have not stopped worrying and started to love the bomb. The bomb is cold comfort. Mutually Assured Destruction does not calm our nerves.

Indeed, technology has in many ways added to our fears. Of course, there are positive uses for the Internet, social media, and mobile phones, but what we hear about is how this technology is causing us to be distant from each other, how bad actors use the tech to spread misinformation, and how kids are developing bad habits and attitudes because they are constantly glued to media and technology

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur                                          The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
Emanuel Episcopal Church                                             8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.
Middleburg, Virginia                                                   April 21, 2024

You would think that we needed new metaphors to give us comfort and peace of mind. But the shepherd and his flock persist as the model in which we find the most comfort. I attended a funeral on Friday and, as you might guess, we read Psalm 23 while the tears flowed. The image of a devoted shepherd shows up in other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, Moses after fleeing Egypt tends sheep for his father-in-law Jethro. Moses is tending sheep when he encounters the burning bush. King David as a young man is a shepherd. His father calls him in from tending the sheep. It is then that Samuel recognizes him as the one that God wants him to anoint as the new King of Israel. In Ezekiel chapter 34 God says he will destroy the bad shepherds and God will replace them with himself as the Good Shepherd.
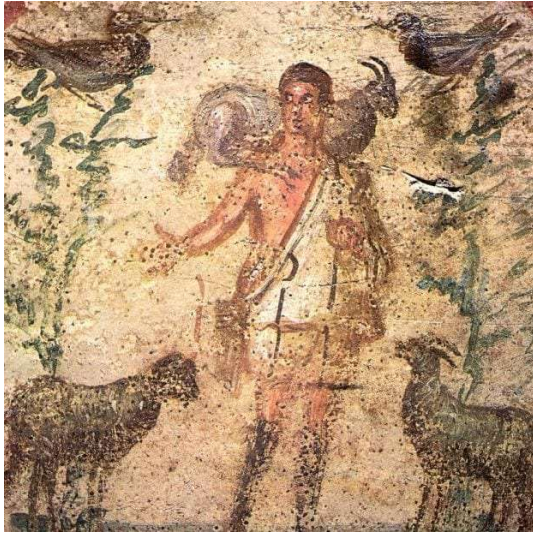
While we do not understand the art of shepherding sheep, we want what the shepherd has to offer. We want comfort from our pain and anxiety. We want to know that we will have healthy food to eat and fresh water to drink. We want to know that even when our enemies are present and surrounding us that God will provide for our needs. We want protection. We want the shepherd to have his rod for fighting off predators. We want the shepherd to carry his staff to keep us together and in line. We want to have comfort in the shadow of death. We want to know goodness and mercy. We want to be God's own.

There is nothing wrong with these desires. They are normal which is why the 23rd Psalm is so beloved. It may also be why the earliest images of Jesus depict him as the Good Shepherd. In these images he is in Roman dress with a short tunic and sandals. His hair is short, and he does not have a beard. He always has a lamb draped across his shoulders. He sometimes has a few sheep around him to portray his literal or figurative flock. [See images below.]

That is the Jesus we seek. That is the Jesus we need. The one who will protect us from the wolf, and not flee because he feels in danger. The one who will lay down his life for us. The one who knows us as his own, and who we know as our own. The one who is determined to call all people into one flock that he cares for. No one is left out. No one is left behind. We belong to him as he belongs to the Father. Through him we will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.



catacombs fresco circa 200 AD

Good Shepherd, fresco, artist unknown, Catacomb of Priscilla



Catacombs 3rd-4th centuries AD