

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Daris Bultena

May 3, 2009

4th Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:5-12

⁵The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" ⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' ¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

John 10:11-18

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The 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. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

"Sheep Shape"

It was total and complete chaos. I listened to it as long as I could. I thought to myself, "can't the teacher in that room hear this? Doesn't she know what is going on in there?" I just could not take it anymore. Now mind you, it was late in the day. The kids had been there all day. It was raining so they could not go outside. They had been cooped up in that room all day long.

It sounded as if they were bouncing a ball off the reverse side of the back wall of my study. When I had had enough, rose from my chair, and charged into the room I came to see that precisely that was what was happening. So I said, "What do you think you are doing? You weren't

raised in a barn?” Yep, I had heard those words as a youngster. The room was a total mess. There was stuff everywhere and kids we bouncing off the walls. There was no semblance of order in any regard whatsoever.

Then it happened...I started channeling my mother from about 40 years ago. “I want this place shaped up. I’m going to be back in 5 minutes. If it isn’t done—I’ll clean it up but I’m using a garbage bag. You better shape it up.”

The kids knew I meant business. I was using my tough guy voice. And I did not hear the ball bounce off my wall again—well, not that day anyway.

“You had better shape it up.” “I want this place ship shape.” It means I want it orderly. I want it tidy. I want it together.

I used to visit with these people. They were delightful. But when you came into their home, she would say to you, “Pick where you want to sit and I’ll clear the way.” Every chair, every surface, every everywhere was covered in piles of stuff. There were piles of newspapers and magazines and read and unread mail. Everywhere there was stuff, stuff, stuff. Oh for about 20 minutes and a handful of garbage bags there. It would not have taken long to get that living room into ship shape.

If something is ship shape it is tidy. It is orderly. It is tight. It is together.

Let me tell you. It is not how my garage is. It is not how my basement is. It is not how the middle drawer of my desk is. They are anything but tidy, orderly, together; they are anything but ship shape.

It is also not how I experience people. They are anything but tidy, orderly, tight, and together. I used to be in awe when I would go into someone’s office and every book was in place as if they have never been

used or read (and maybe they were not) and there was nothing on their desk. I used to think that was just ideal. But it is not for me. It is not real.

Life is far more closer (yes, I intended to put those words together)—life is more closer to kids and balls bouncing off the walls and my friend who would ask you when you came into her living room where you wanted to sit so she could shift a pile or three around in order to make space for you. We as people are far from ship shape. We are, as I'm putting it today, more sheep shape. Yes, you heard me right "sheep shape."

*

There are so many of these wonderful old Scriptural illustrations and metaphors are lost on us as readers in this day and age. We are more acquainted with stock markets than we are with live stock. We tend to be people that live on the land, but not of it. So of these earthy metaphors are not so lively for us.

Here is this wonderful passage where Jesus announces "I am the good shepherd." And we have lost touch with shepherds and sheep so what comes to our mind is one of those nice pastoral scenes. The kind of pictures that you used to find in Sunday School classrooms where Jesus is there holding a little lamb in his arms and there are other lambs gathered around him. Aww, it is one of those oh so, well, so nice views of how life is.

That is not sheep. And it is not shepherd either. Shepherds were then the underclass of society. This was not a pretty job. Shepherds were your lower class of folk who had to work hard in order to earn a living. They had late nights, sometimes dangerous terrain, they were as smelly as their flocks, and they were uneducated entry level workers.

But remember it was to such as these that the angel visitors on the hillsides of Bethlehem brought the news—“Do not be afraid. Behold. Good news of a great joy. To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And you will find the babe wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in manger.” And it was the lowly shepherd, long before the educated wisdom seekers who encountered the new born King.

Ah yes, shepherds, none of us would take those jobs. And Jesus tells us, “I am the good shepherd.”

Sheep are not sweet and gentle. We are most familiar with sheep at the Christmas play. That’s what we do with kids after we have filled the roles of Mary and Joseph and the Shepherds and the Inn Keeper. We dress the rest up as angels and sheep. It’s the same costume—fluffy and white—one with wings and one without. Dear sweet and tender sheep.

Hardly. Sheep are unruly. Sheep are difficult. You can herd cattle. You can get them in a group and herd them where you want them to go and they generally do as you want them to do in fairly predictable ways. You can understand their movements. Sheep are not the same. You cannot herd them.

Sheep go this way and that way. Sheep have a mind of their own. They will wander off. They will lose sight of the rest of the sheep and do their own thing. They are anything but tidy and organized and together. They are not ship shape they are sheep shape!

People are like sheep. Not the sweet gentle, pastoral scene, portrait type. No, the real thing. Unruly. Going this way and that way. Doing their own thing. We really are sheep.

In all of our seemingly chaotic nature and way of being there is the hap-hazardness way we exist. In all the pursuits we have and in all the ways those things come together and do not come together—we as people really are more sheep shape than ship shape. And that's okay.

But sheep—oh here is what sheep do. Sheep count on the shepherd. And this is where this whole sheep/shepherd metaphor comes together. See what is different about sheep from other animals is the movement. Other animals you push along and prod—you herd them. Not sheep. Sheep are led.

Sheep are oriented in a different way. You lead sheep. The shepherd leads them. The shepherd goes before the sheep. The shepherd does not come from behind pushing them along. Not with sheep. No, the shepherd goes before the sheep calling back to the sheep to come after him. And the sheep follow.

So when Jesus says, I am the Good Shepherd, the dynamic is that he goes before us. He takes the lead. And he does all those things that a shepherd does for the sheep.

A shepherd cares for the sheep, a shepherd feeds the sheep, a shepherd keeps the sheep safe, and a shepherd leads the sheep. So it is cares, feeds, leads—that is what a shepherd does.

But notice here that Jesus adds to that. Jesus says there is something else that the good shepherd does, that other shepherds do not do. Jesus says that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And this text always appears on the 4th Sunday of Easter. And it appears here in the season of Easter deliberately. We are supposed to hear these incredible words of Jesus the cross and the empty tomb. When Jesus says that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep and that he will take it up again—oh, you had bet we are supposed to be translating that into what we know has just taken place.

We are to be hearing in that the cross and the resurrection---that in crucifixion Jesus laid down his life and in being raised from the dead his life has been restored to the place that nothing can stop it or diminish it.

Oh yes, that is there in John 10—and remember when we read John we have to read it on both that horizontal level (of plain talk) and that other vertical level (of spiritual realities where only those with ears to hear can hear).

But it is the detail of the sheep shape here that calls out attention. It is that detail because we live such fractured and frenetic lives these days. We are here and there and everywhere. There is so much to be done that we can never get it all done.

There are so many options as to how to structure our lives, and jobs, and families, and church, and community that it seems as if all those options and structures leave us with no structure at all. There is no ship shapeness to anything anymore.

It is all sheep shape---with everyone going off in their own way. Doing their own thing. Every thing is up for grabs...yes, everything. Okay.

So be it. It is what it is.

And it will be what it will be. There is no turning back to simple life now. We can Twitter about it all we want and seldom will anyone give a hoot—we won't be less frantic. There are still about 40 new emails a day, and the kids are bouncing off the walls, and future is uncertain, and there are so many piles now that there are piles of piles and who knows what pile the thing is really in or under....

Who knows? Who cares? Its crazy. Its fast paced. It never stops. Everything shifts. Shifts, shifts, and more shifts. We are deep into it—so far into it—how did we ever get here? Where are we going? Can we shape it up?

Will it ever be ship shape? No! It will always be sheep shape! Chaotic. Frantic. On the edge. Burdened. Unsure. Busy as can be. Sheep shape—going here, going there, going where....Sheep shape!

But don't miss it—what does it say. It is the reality of sheep. It is the truth of being sheep shape. Don't miss it. What does it say? "I am the Good Shepherd....I know my own, and my own know me."

"I know my own, and my own know me."

You see, the sheep in all their sheepness—in all of it they know their shepherd. Their shepherd knows them. They recognize the voice of the shepherd. It is that voice that calms them, that collects them, that allows them to follow, and enables them to makes sense of where they are going and what is happening to them.

"I know my own, and my own know me."

In all your sheep shape you know the shepherd. Oh he knows you—knows you so well that he gave his whole self for you. "I know my own, and my own know me."

Listen. Listen for the voice of the shepherd. It calls out to you in the chaos of your living. It calls out to you in the frenetic activity of your life. That voice, that love of God, alive in the Holy Spirit who resides in you is speaking to you in those moments of noise and in those moments of quiet when you can hear better.

Trust it—trust it that in our sheep shape—we know the Good Shepherd and the Good Shepherd knows us.

To know is to love. And if you listen—even as the balls and kids bounce off the walls...if you listen in the silence of the lit candle or that moment when you breathe in just before you fall asleep---in all of it the sound is the sure...it is the sound of God...the Good Shepherd...loving you...loving us...the sheep in whatever shape we are in. Amen.