

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter 2015 4B
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Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we read a portion of the tenth chapter of John's Gospel. The entire chapter is the account of Jesus describing himself as "The Good Shepherd," and contrasting his own care and sacrifice on behalf of his flock to that of the wolf, who is always seeking to harm the sheep, and the hired hand, who, instead of protecting the flock, runs away at the first sign of danger. It's pretty clear that the "hired hands" Jesus is talking about are the leaders of his own faith community, the ones who Peter was arguing with in the first reading, because Jesus has just spent most of the previous chapter of John's gospel answering their accusations and arguing with them himself.

The wolf might well stand for the forces of evil, or of Empire, or the allure of sin, or any number of things that threaten the spiritual and material lives of Jesus' flock. The point of the metaphor would be the same – that unlike those who are supposed to be the guardians of the people, Jesus will lay down his life to protect them from those threats.

And so, during Eastertide, we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday in the knowledge that Jesus did, in fact, lay down his life for his flock, and that we are part of that

flock. And more importantly, we remember that Jesus' sacrifice for us worked, and we were saved from the wolves that threaten us.

Just what it means, though, to be saved, is a matter of some contention among the various people who claim to be part of Jesus' flock.

Some Christians believe that being saved is equivalent to being converted – that your salvation happens when you consciously accept Jesus as your Savior and believe what Scripture teaches about Jesus' life, death and resurrection for your own sake.

Other Christians tie salvation to Baptism, and believe that salvation comes when you are washed of sin in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And other Christians believe that our salvation was accomplished when Jesus laid down his life for us, and rose again in defiance of the powers of evil, and that our salvation is not dependant on our actions at all, but that the transformation of our lives for the good happens in response to, and not in anticipation of our salvation.

My own view, and that of the Episcopal Church in general, leans toward this third option – that our salvation has been accomplished, once and for all, by Jesus sacrifice on our behalf, and that we are trying to respond to that unequalled gift by living lives of thankfulness and praise.

But those three ideas about what it means to be saved and many others besides point out one of the difficulties the followers of Jesus have had since the beginning, a difficulty which is the other theme of the Good Shepherd discourse in John's gospel. We have, and by "we" in this case I mean all of the followers of Jesus throughout history to the present day, been exceedingly concerned with the question of who is saved and who isn't; of who can be part of the flock, and who can't. It has been an obsession of Christians since the earliest days to clearly define who is in and who is out. The disciples debated long and hard whether you had to be Jewish to be Christian. The Christians of the next many centuries struggled to define exact sets of doctrine, dogma and official writings and beliefs to define who was faithful and who was a heretic.

As the church divided over time, into Roman and Orthodox and Coptic, and eventually into Protestant and Catholic, and then into the many sects of Protestantism, over and over the battles about right belief and right practice have been, in the end, battles about who is in and who is outside of the flock, and not just here on earth, but in the next life as well. Christians have spent a lot of time worrying about whether they, those they love, and particularly those they disagree with, will get to heaven.

But Jesus doesn't seem to share our obsession about who is in and who is out.

Throughout his life, Jesus was constantly welcoming the societal outsiders of his day into relationship with him and into community with his followers. When his disciples tried to shut down strangers who were doing good works in Jesus' name because they were not part of their community, Jesus stopped them, telling his followers that anyone who was not against them was for them – that they in fact did not know all of Jesus' flock.

And so in today's gospel reading, Jesus tells his followers that he has many other flocks that they do not know, and that eventually they will all be one flock with one shepherd.

This is, sad to say, the opposite of how institutional Christianity has usually been practiced. Instead of trying to reconcile ourselves with the many flocks of Christians that have responded to Jesus' voice, we are all too prone to claiming that our own flock is "The Flock," and that only way for there to be one flock with one shepherd is for those other flocks to join ours and conform to our particular way of interpreting scripture and worshiping, and shaping our daily lives. We have a hard time remembering that while there is but one shepherd, there are not just many sheep, there are many flocks of sheep. In my favorite part of our Communion prayer today we will ask God to protect the universal church and to "reveal its

unity.” We don’t pray that God unite us, but to make us see that we are already one.

Many Episcopalians, to be sure, understand this innately. While there are some who proclaim the Anglican tradition to be the best or even the only true expression of Christian faith, most of us are not so bold. We experience other Christians making such claims for their traditions and understandings, and even denouncing our church as not truly Christian, and we recoil not only at the denial of the validity of our faith and experience, but also at the sheer arrogance of it, and we determine not to make such claims for our church.

But we often lose something important when we do that. In our unwillingness to claim that our tradition is “best” or “only,” we often become reluctant to proclaim to the world that our tradition, our experience, our community is nonetheless good and true.

We know, as deeply as we know anything, that this is a good place to be, that grace is plentiful here, that the Holy Spirit can often be felt among us, that this is a community where faith is nurtured, and that the Episcopal tradition of worship and theology brings us closer to God in profound and reliable ways.

Yet in our unwillingness to say this is the best place, the holiest place for everybody, we seem, throughout our denomination, to have a hard time saying to the world that this is a good place, a holy place, a welcoming place.

We at St. James' Church, we Episcopalians, we the Worldwide Anglican Communion are not Jesus' only flock. We are not the only ones who respond to his voice. We are not the only ones for whom Jesus laid down his life.

But we are his, and we are holy, and we have been saved, and we should tell our friends and the world that this is one good and safe and welcoming place to be part of the one flock and get to know the one shepherd.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!