

Good Shepherd  
The Rev. Lauren McDonald  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – May 3, 2009  
John 10:11-18

It may not come as a surprise to most of you that I'm a bit of a romantic. I get idealized images in my head about things that actually have little to do with reality. Last week Michael talked about how we know things are the "real deal." Frequently I'm more attached to the fantasy image in my head than I am to the reality of something. Maybe it comes from reading too many fairy tales as a kid. Here's an example:

Whenever I've had to fill out one of those forms that asks what my occupation is or what I'd like it to be, I always scan the list to see if there's anything more appealing than what I'm doing at the moment. (Well, not now of course, but before I became a priest.) One of the jobs that always caught my eye was librarian. Librarian. Here's where my romantic side would kick in. I pictured the old Margaret Mitchell Library in my hometown of Fayetteville, GA. It was located in a small white house about the same size as the historic chapel. The floors creaked as you walked across them. The children's books were to the right and the adult books were to the left. The library provided a refuge in which people spoke in hushed tones, and you could wander through the stacks, lost in the other worlds of books. I imagined that being a librarian meant you could spend all day in a room like that, just hanging out with all those books. It has to be the least stressful, best job ever.

We have at least one librarian in the congregation, and I'm sure she would laugh at my description. Apparently my imaginary library lacks visitors and media equipment. Certainly there are no poorly behaved students in my library. To work in my library you don't need a degree in library science. You just have to love books. Like me. You may note that no one has ever hired me to be a librarian.

No one has ever hired me to be a shepherd, either. Once again, my romantic imagination goes wild! What could be better? Wandering around in lush green grass with little white cotton ball sheep? Beautiful scenery, a nice shepherd's crook, a daily nap under a tree when the afternoon sun gets warm, maybe even a trusty sheepdog at my side to do most of the work. Sure, sometimes I might have to chase after a lost sheep, but each job has its challenges, right? Whenever the stress of the theatre got me down, I could picture myself on a little hillside beside my flock of sheepies, humming a little tune and loving life.

It's probably clear to all of you that I didn't grow up on a farm. No one who's ever been close to a sheep would fall for my little pastoral daydream. They aren't little soft cotton balls; they're wool! They're stinky and stubborn, and they don't live on little green hillsides (well except maybe in England!) And they're a whole lot of work. And that's just if they're on a farm. Never mind if you have to shepherd them from place to place in a land that is very dry. Sigh... Another imaginary occupation swept aside by reality.

Of course I'm being a little silly here, making fun of my tendency to romanticize things. But I think it's a trap we can fall into on this Sunday that is sometimes known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Most of us love the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Many of us probably know it by heart. It's comforting with its images of green pastures and

still waters. It's comforting to know that the Lord is with us, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It's also comforting to hear Jesus describe himself as the good shepherd who will take care of his flock. There's nothing wrong with feeling comforted, and there's nothing wrong with those images. They can provide strength when we most need it. I would invite us to remember, though, that Jesus is about a whole lot more than comfort.

I went online this week to look up images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Many of them were pictures of Jesus with a lamb over his shoulders and a flock of sheep gazing up at him with adoring eyes. They were pastoral scenes in which the background looked more like the British Isles than 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. They kind of look like my imaginary world of shepherding. They certainly capture the image of Jesus as protector and comforter, but I can't help but wonder whether the Good Shepherd of these paintings would challenge the political and religious authorities of his time and consent to death on a cross.

When I was looking at these Good Shepherd images, I came across a painting by Daniel Bonnell.<sup>1</sup> I've put up a few copies in the Narthex for those who would like to see it. This painting was stark and bare by contrast with the more pastoral paintings. Most of the canvas was filled with simple images of white sheep. There were very few details, an eye here and some ears there. Looking at it you get the feel of a large flock of sheep all crowded together, perhaps even an entire world of sheep. In the foreground is the image of a gaunt man with his arms outstretched as if hanging on the cross. It may be that we're actually seeing the shadow he casts as he hangs on the cross. Again there are few details, just some muscles in the back and the head hanging forward. The man is all in shades of blue, contrasting with

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<sup>1</sup> To see the image online, go to: [http://iocproject.com/gallery/painting.php?sort\\_mode=title&sku=10037](http://iocproject.com/gallery/painting.php?sort_mode=title&sku=10037).

the white of the sheep. *This* shepherd laid down his life for his sheep. When I looked at this painting I could see Jesus putting himself in between his flock and the wolves, in between us and death. He laid down his life for us.

That's what this passage is about. It's not about rolling green hills and cotton ball sheep and the fantasy of a good life with no hardships. It's about the shepherd who knows what his responsibility is, who understands how much work it is to care for the sheep and that protecting the sheep may require his death. It's about sheep who know their shepherd so well that they follow whenever they hear his voice, trusting him to guide them so that they do not get lost. It's about the Son of God who was willing to die in order to save the world.

Our shepherd laid down his life for us.

He knows us when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

He knows us when we walk on the mountaintops of life.

He knows us in the ordinary moments of our daily routine.

He knows us when we're making big decisions and facing major crises.

He knows us when we're walking close beside him.

He finds us when we are lost.

Our shepherd knows us.

Do we know him?