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April 22, 2018: Easter 4B (Good Shepherd Sunday)

Good Shepherd Sunday, according to a long and venerable tradition in the Church, is that Sunday of the year on which pampered, urban clergy who have never set foot on a farm pretend to know a thing or two about sheep. I have to be honest with you, sheep don't grab me. I was fully ready to avoid talking about sheep and shepherds this morning because I'm just so dang tired of being called a sheep. Maybe this is an image for the life of faith that's more meaningful and potent for those of you who grew up in rural areas and have actual experience, as Jesus of Nazareth probably would have, with sheep and sheep herding. I don't know the first thing about the business of sheep raising, but I do have some experience with the world of religious sentimentality, and it seems to me that there is no Christian image – no icon, no metaphor for God – as susceptible to a treacly, cutesy sentimentality as is the image of the Good Shepherd and the adorable little lamb he carries safely in his arms. Sheep are cute, and that's part of the problem. Sheep may also be obstinate and dumb, I've heard it said, although apparently that's a rumor originally promulgated by cattle ranchers who were frustrated that sheep didn't act like cows and called them stupid. But – cattle ranchers notwithstanding, Jesus never said, "I am the good cowboy." It's kind of a shame, isn't it; I sort of delight in the image of my Lord and Savior in chaps.

But we're stuck with sheep. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." It's a clear echo of Psalm 23, which Jesus would probably have memorized from his Jewish childhood as many of us have it memorized from Sunday School: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters, he reviveth my soul." It's become perhaps the most beloved of the Psalms, at least for Protestant Americans – Catholics don't historically have a fetish for Psalm 23 in the same way we do, but WASPs love it, this beautiful hymn of trust and security found in the vigilant, watchful love of the One who guideth me along right pathways, yea, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. On the surface, Psalm 23 is all about safety and comfort. There are dangers lurking in this Psalm, to be sure: the presence of those who trouble me, the presence of mine enemies is always waiting just beyond the green pastures and the still waters. But what we love about Psalm 23 is that it gives us a happy ending, that's probably why it's the go-to Psalm for a funeral. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The King James Translation of this Psalm which many people know almost by heart, is one of the great masterpieces of the English language. Unfortunately, it tends to obscure some of the more interesting and radical ideas that the Psalm contains, which are the very ideas about sheep and shepherding that Jesus picks up on when he calls himself the Good Shepherd. If we can look beyond the easy sentimentality of a blonde-haired blue-eyed Jesus and a spotlessly clean little lamb, there's some really interesting stuff going on. This is an image of leadership that is non-hierarchical and also entirely clear about roles and responsibilities. This is an image of protection that is neither militant nor defensive. It's an image of care and guidance that is never pushy or coercive. The Good Shepherd is actually a little more subversive than the pious Sunday School paintings give him credit for.

Psalm 23 describes a journey – an often-difficult journey, through rocky and complicated territory, and the images of comfort and security along the way – the green pastures and the still waters – are envisioned as stopping-off places, not as final destinations. Life is a journey, as the Psalmist understands it, a continuous rhythm of going out and coming back; finding places of solace and comfort to rest, but only for a moment. The real work, the real journey, the place where the shepherd is always leading the sheep is actually back into the valley of the shadow of death. The darkness, the pain, the places of

suffering and despair in this Psalm are never envisioned as places from which to flee, a dark patch to be gotten through as quickly as possible. Psalm 23 actually gives us an image of a Shepherd who keeps leading his flock into the valley, and it's in the valley of the shadow, in the presence of all mine enemies, the presence of everything that troubles me – that's the place where the banquet is spread.

Americans have tended to look for an individualized, comforting Shepherd rather than a challenging, demanding shepherd who may know each of his sheep by name but is caring for them as a flock, as a group, as a community - not as solo artists on an epic journey to heaven. There is comfort to be had in this psalm, to be sure – but as soon as we get a little too comfy in the house of the Lord, the Psalm suggests, the Good Shepherd is actually standing at the door, ready to lead us back out into the valleys of the world. That's certainly the way Jesus understands this Psalm. "The Good Shepherd," he says, "is good *because* he is willing to embrace death – because death doesn't frighten him, because the needs of those entrusted to his care are of paramount importance." And Jesus seems to be suggesting not just "I'll take care of you," but more specifically, "if you're going to follow my voice, you have to take care of one another." The First Letter of John, a later writer coming out of the same tradition as the Gospel of John, a writer who riffs and comments on the ideas of the gospel, gives a sort of gloss on the image of the Good Shepherd as it applies to his community, he writes "We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us – therefore, we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How can God's love abide in someone," he asks, "who has all the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and in action." There's a clear litmus test for this writer, and it's uncomfortably black-and-white: professing with your lips and believing with your mind is easy. Loving in truth and action takes you into the valley of the shadow of death, the very place where Jesus was willing to go, and the very place, John suggests, to which Jesus' followers are called.

I thought I had a pretty easy life. When I was twenty-four or twenty-five – single, lonely, struggling without a job – I prayed to God one morning in the shower: "If you would just get me a job and a boyfriend, I'll be fine." And a year later, I had a great job; a couple years later I had the boyfriend who became my husband; we bought a house with a freakin' white picket fence in front. I turned thirty, I thought I was set, I became the dean of a gorgeous Cathedral and I thought I had arrived.

But what I've discovered is that the Good Shepherd isn't quite finished with me yet. And that place of safety and security – the house with the white picket fence that I dreamed about when I was a lonely twenty-something – that may be my idea of security, but it's not always God's idea. Over the past year or so, James and I have been facing some really interesting twists and turns. James didn't know, when he married me, that I'd be called to be the dean of this Trinity Cathedral, and that's been a tricky challenge in some ways for both of us, but for James in some very particular ways. I don't think either of us anticipated the kind of radical availability that this job would ask of us.

Some of you know – because it's all over Facebook – that James has been on his own journey over the past year or so. It all culminated a few weeks ago when he was crowned the winner of Portland's Drag Comedy competition; I am now in a position to say that I'm married to the Queen of Portland Drag Comedy. That's not a future I envisioned for myself; it's not something I saw coming when I walked down the aisle of this Cathedral and made my marriage vows in the presence of my bishop and my congregation; I didn't know, when we got together, that drag was in James' future. But what he's discovered, what I've discovered – and this is no surprise, really – is that the very things that make my husband a good priest are the things that make him a great drag queen. James would say it's all one vocation: he puts on a dress and creates community on Sunday morning, and he does the same thing on

Saturday night in a wig and heels. And I have to tell you, the first time I saw my husband in drag, I kind of freaked out. I wasn't not ready for that, and I have to admit, I have been dragged into this whole situation kicking and screaming a bit. I've been judgy and condemning, I've been passive aggressive and withholding, I'd done just about everything in my power except work to love and celebrate the incredible person my husband is and is becoming. So that's been my valley: not the drag, actually; that's the window-dressing. It's been my own discomfort, my shame at my own lack of understanding and acceptance, my fear about what this would mean for me. And I'm learning now: this is where I need to be. This is the valley of the shadow of death, and I love it. There is a banquet spread before me, if I have the willingness to actually sit down and eat.

Because God is never found in the clench of my fear. God is never experienced in the grip of judgement and condemnation that I know too well. I hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling when I pursue the challenge of love – and it is a challenging path. But that is where the Good Shepherd calls us.

We say sometimes at Trinity that we have designed our liturgies to comfort you where you hurt and to challenge you where you may have grown complacent. Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, as a mentor of mine used to say. So, if you're a harried and harassed sheep today, hounded by dangers and despairs, longing for a place of safety and security, you are invited to lay your head down. There is water and green grass here; this Cathedral exists to be a place of refuge and healing and peace for all God's sheep, from whatever fold they happen to come. But if you're like me, and maybe you've grown a little complacent, a little safe, a little risk-avoidant in your life – or maybe you're feeling that pinch, that nudge, that goad – and maybe you're getting ready to move out of the place of safety and security and into the valley of the shadow of death, wherever that is for you. That valley is also the valley of growth and transformation. I can't tell you what's going to happen to you out there; the world is a dangerous place. This much I know: the promise is that we don't go there alone. The Shepherd goes with us, alongside us, ahead of us - leading the way, beckoning us forward into the places we're afraid to go. There's nothing saccharine or sentimental about this guy. He walks right into the valley of the shadow of death and stands there beckoning us on. He got there first, and stands there beckoning, urging, leading us on. But even in the darkest of valleys, we fear no evil. The weird and counter-intuitive rhythm of this life of faith is that the sometimes place of safety is actually the most dangerous place. It can be a place of lethargy, of contentment. And that's actually not where we hear the voice. The counter-intuitive thing is that it's in the place of danger, of risk, that we're held most closely. The place of danger is actually the place of greatest safety.