

Sermon :: 11-May-2025
Easter 4, Year C

“ He ... guides me along right pathways[,] for His Name’s sake ”

I rise, today. in defense of ... *sheep!*

Now, I know this is Good *Shepherd* Sunday, and our focus is primarily on *Jesus*,¹ Who *is* the Good Shepherd; on the *Risen Christ*, Who’s given us—has, if you will, graciously *herded* us *into*—eternal life: the promise of Paradise, with all its green pastures and still waters. But if you’ll indulge me a moment, I want to share with you some interesting facts I’ve learned about *sheep*, these last few weeks:

- Did you know sheep’s eyes have *rectangular pupils*? This allows them to see in virtually every direction² except directly behind them, to avoid predators.
- They possess excellent facial recognition skills. They can recognize the faces of up to fifty other sheep—and also the faces of their human caregivers—and *remember* them for up to *two years*.
- And sheep are highly social and emotive. They communicate with each other through their bleating³ ... and according to researchers who’ve studied them in depth, sheep experience a wide range of complex emotions, including happiness, fear, anger, boredom ... and even optimism, pessimism and empathy!

All of which is to say: When Jesus tells us He is the Good Shepherd, Who calls us by name ... gives us eternal life ... and will never let *anyone* or *anything* snatch us away from His loving arms and merciful salvation ... He uses a metaphor more subtle ... more canny ... than we moderns may grasp. For if we are His *sheep* ... we’re not cute, cuddly puffs-of-wool, too dim to get by on our own ... not helpless, passive grass-grazers who mindlessly follow whoever (or whatever) happens to come along. Rather, Jesus is telling us we’re intelligent, compassionate, sensitive—in a word (if I may use it here without too much irony!), *humane*—creatures with a multi-faceted ... nuanced ... and sometimes deeply complicated relationship with this world: this world we *live* in as *Jesus’ sheep*.

And *there*, perhaps, is the *rub* ... the *Easter rub*: For Jesus is not the Good Shepherd of **only** our *afterlife* ... not the Pastor Who waits to anoint our heads with oil and guide us to the table spread before us **only** in *Heaven*, at our *deaths* ... but also *now* ... in *this* lifetime ... in *these* times ... *these* very days. Jesus rose from the dead to give the **world** New Life in the *present*, as *well* as the future ... in the *now*, as *well* as the ‘someday’ ... in the living of our lives on *this* side of the veil, as *well* as the other.

And if we follow our Good Shepherd like *sheep* ... like *intelligent, compassionate, sensitive* sheep; like *humane* sheep ... then we’re bound to encounter some difficulties: bound to have Him lead us to unfamiliar pastures we’d prefer not to be in ... bound to have Him **mix us in** with *other* sheep we’d just as soon avoid ... bound to have Him ask us to go places and do things we’d rather not contemplate, let alone risk. But like Tabitha, whom St Peter raises from the dead and gives a new life-of-faith—to *live* and *live out*, in *this* world ... so, too, has Jesus—*already!*—raised *us* from the cramped futility of earthly life *alone* ... and into *both* the *capaciousness* ... and the **responsibility** ... of Eternal Life, in Him ... *here* and *now*.

Like sheep, we are to recognize in the faces of our fellow creatures the God-given gift of humanity ... and *tend* to them, *now*. Like sheep, we are to use our eyes to their fullest compass: to *scan* for threats ... *identify* dangers—predators who would destroy; thieves who would lead astray ... and

¹ As, of course, it always is!

² Between 270° and 320°.

³ And also from secretions from scent glands on their faces and hooves.

warn the flock, so we can, collectively, *respond* to them. Like sheep, we are to be keen—savvy—*sensitive* to—the pain, the suffering, the outrage *of ... and* the injustice done *to ... other* sheep in the human flock ... and show *empathy*: not just a hurting heart or a confounded conscience ... but *love*—a *divine* love, an *Easter* love: a love goaded and spurred to the point that we must *run to* the other ... to comfort and protect, to defend and make right.

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Perhaps one of the most difficult ... most challenging ... most vexing ... ways Jesus calls us to follow Him as His sheep—to live the Easter life He calls us to, *today* ... in *this* lifetime ... in the **current present**—is His command, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). Now, I’m not sure there’s *ever* been a time in history when human society has *lacked* enmity... but in *2025*, we seem to be living in veritable armed camps: the battle lines drawn ... the exclusion lists compiled and published. We’ve jammed into a red-hot fire ... the **iron stamps** of vicious, searing **brands**—CONTEMPTIBLE, IGNORANT, TAKER, FASCIST, CRIMINAL, TERRORIST, WOKE, OLIGARCH, BLEEDING-HEART, DICTATOR, IMMIGRANT, UNCHRISTIAN ... so we can identify ... inflict ... *punish* ... maybe even *torture* ... our enemies with labels that *dehumanize* them ... rob them of *their equal Easter life*, in the eyes of Christ ... mark them down ... and indelibly *brand* them with a **scarlet label**: LESS-THAN ... ‘NO-GOOD’ ... ‘PURE EVIL.’

Jesus’ call to *love* our enemies ... perhaps one of the most ‘Easter’ messages He ever preaches, for who can afford to *love* those who hate them, except those who’ve *already* received *everything* they could ever want or desire, in this world *and* the next? ... is *not* a call to capitulate ... *not* an order to retreat ... *not* a lesson in giving up or giving in. Indeed, Jesus spends His entire earthly ministry opposing and contesting those who misgovern the people ... malign the poor ... mislead the faithful ... malnourish the hungry ... mistreat the innocent ... and misunderstand the *true* will and *all-loving* ways of God. No, Jesus does not lack enmity in this world.

But His point is *this*: *Neither* does He *despise* them. *Neither* does He ‘cancel’ them. Neither does He wish them dead ... or fantasize about their comeuppance ... or relish their misfortunes. *His* call to *His* enemies ... as to *all* His sheep ... is to come and see the world from *His* safe, lush pasture ... come feed at *His* plentiful, nourishing table ... come be cared for in *His* loving, protecting arms. ¶While His enemy abides in the fold of His arm, Jesus may tell him how very wickedly **he**’s misconstrued God’s justice ... but Jesus will never kick **him** out, or to the corner. ¶While His enemy feasts on His abundance, Jesus may tell **her** how deeply what **she purports** to do in His Name grieves Him ... but Jesus will never excommunicate her from His embrace or exclude her from His grace. ¶While His enemies bask in His affection, nuzzle His gentle hands and sleep safely in His protection, Jesus may pray for **their** repentance ... their truer understanding ... their rediscovery of the core goodness and decency of humanity ... but Jesus will never stop *praying—as well*—for their health, their flourishing and their faith ... because *they, too*, are His sheep, whom He seeks to “guide[] ... along right pathways[,] for his Name’s sake.”

And in how Jesus treats His *own* enemies, He guides *us*—His sheep—along the right pathways for treating *ours, as well* ... for *His* Name’s sake.

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