

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A, 2008

The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

To paraphrase the Gospel for this morning, Jesus said that he is the way to eternal life and that he gives us a present life that is more abundant. In describing himself this way, he used the imagery of sheep and shepherds, something that not only was he very familiar with, but so were the Jewish people of his day; perhaps even more importantly, so those who heard and read John's Gospel in the Gentile world.

Most of us, since our society is now so urbanized, know very little about sheep and shepherds. We may not realize that sheep are certainly not the brightest of animals; in fact they are quite stupid. They have a way of wandering off and they have little sense of danger. They can find themselves in a desperate situation in a heartbeat. In short, their lives are totally dependent upon their shepherd.

Shepherds or good shepherds that is, care deeply for their sheep, even to the point of loving them. Good shepherds make it a practice to see that their animals are well fed, leading them to areas of abundant grazing, of abundant water. They watch over their flocks by day and night, to protect them from predators. Nights are especially dangerous. Even in rural areas of the United States today, nights are a dangerous time for sheep. The good shepherd has to get them into a corral before nightfall. He uses sheep dogs to help protect them, to alert him of coyotes or cougars. In our Lord's day, these dangers were just as real, even more so. A common practice was for the shepherd to lay, at night, across the gate opening of the corral so that he could be alert to danger and guard the sheep, if need be even at the risk of his life.

I think you can begin to see how fitting the imagery was when Jesus described himself as the good shepherd as well as the gateway for his sheep. The good shepherd knows his sheep and his sheep know him and trust him. Jesus knows us and he protects us, and, quite frankly, he protects us mostly from ourselves. When we know him and follow him, he gives us life and he gives it to us abundantly. He did lay down his life for us, as the good shepherd is prepared to do, and because he did those who believe in him and accept him as their shepherd, as their savior, have eternal life.

Life is about choices. We have all learned from experience that making right choices is crucial and that we can pay, sometimes very heavily, when we make wrong or bad choices. There is no choice that we make more crucial, more important to us than the choice of how we respond when Jesus calls us by name. And call us, he does. If we are followers, we know his voice, just as sheep know their shepherd's voice. Jesus knows us by name; we are not strangers to him. He loves us, each and every one of us, with a love so strong and so unconditional that he died on the

Cross so that we could have life and have it abundantly. Jesus calls us, by name, to that abundant life, here and in the present. It is ours if we are his disciples.

Jesus calls us, also, through the gateway of death to eternal life, and that, too, is ours if we are his disciples. But, the choice of discipleship comes at a cost – a cost of personal sacrifice offered that places Jesus Christ before all else. When we make the decision to bear this burden, to love God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our might, to love our neighbor without condition just as Jesus loves us, and to put self interest aside when self interest conflicts with hearing and responding to our Savior’s call, when we do this we find that a remarkable thing happens. Jesus said, “Take my burden upon you; my yoke is easy, my burden is light.” Jesus takes the weight off of our shoulders, and bears our burdens for us when we are his disciples, and he leads us down a safe pathway, through whatever trials we may have to face, until he takes us to his Father’s home. *Amen.*

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