

Easter 4 B
April 22, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

When I had an office in Paulsen House, one of the notable things about it was that a flock of sheep lived there. Fortunately, not the kind that you find on a farm, but the more docile type: wooden ones, ceramic ones, stuffed animals and the like. A lot of my sheep came home with people who found them on their travels and had some special meaning from a variety of places.

One of my favorites, still in the collection, is an olive wood carving of a Palestinian shepherd. He is barefoot, leaning on a wooden staff and nestling in the crook of his arm is a lamb. The lamb is clearly contented to be there. He is relaxed – hind legs hanging down and brushing against the shepherd's hip in a posture that suggests utter trust.

The carving suggests today's gospel and collect where we meet Jesus as the good shepherd who cares for his sheep and will not abandon them – who knows them by name. The big difference is that we are the sheep.

It can be tempting to put this Good Shepherd image in a pretty small box – create a stereotype that is simple and even sentimental. And perhaps that's why this isn't a text that a lot of preachers enjoy working on.

But I think there is a quite bit more going on here. In this image we see the good shepherd is one who is both tender and tough. One who cradles the lambs in his arms and also takes on the big bad wolf. One who is willing to lay down his own

life for the sheep. This is no kid stuff. It speaks, through this metaphor of the shepherd, of the real needs and concerns of being human – part of the flock.

And a real point of connection as we think about being a part of the flock is vulnerability. Those Palestinian shepherds were and are protectors of their sheep. There are dangers – predators, dangerous terrain. It is the shepherd's job to keep the sheep, who are often foolish, needy and dependent, from those dangers.

Most of us don't like to think of ourselves as vulnerable. In fact, that can be one of our most uncomfortable realities. Just a few weeks ago some of us experienced foot-washing on Maundy Thursday – a time when we may have washed someone's feet and then allowed someone else to tenderly wash our feet. Even though we can enjoy that experience of being served at some level, we also have a tinge of discomfort when someone performs that kind of task for us, even in a much less charged atmosphere than the disciples experienced at the Last Supper.

Most of us just don't like to feel vulnerable. One of the marks of American culture (and certainly the culture of the western United States) is a kind of self-sufficiency – a real value for strength and independence. But if we are really honest with ourselves, we know that we don't have everything under control. Vulnerability is not exactly a choice.

We know there are dangers and difficulties in our world – violence here in our own region and beyond, a disregard for the needs of others. A drug culture that is very visible in the neighborhood where I once ministered here in Spokane. War

rages or threatens in many parts of the world. We are sometimes witnesses to great suffering, poverty and discrimination. We live in a volatile political environment . And we often feel powerless to understand any of this, let alone to bring healing.

We also live in a time of incredibly rapid change. Technology is outpacing itself. What was state-of-the-art yesterday is obsolete tomorrow. I have a whole basket of charging cords for devices that are history. I also have a whole notebook full of internet passwords—so many I can't memorize them all.

Knowledge increases at an incredible rate. Social changes make our head spin. Whoever thought that I would be keeping up with my far-flung family on something like Instagram or Facebook ? Whoever thought I would be wearing a watch that communicates with my phone?

How do we listen to the voice of the shepherd to help guide us through this kind of unfamiliar and rapidly changing terrain? To accompany us through unknown places? We turn to the good shepherd as our companion and our guide – one who, in our vulnerability, we can trust.

This picture of the shepherd also reminds us of our need to be known, not just in a superficial way, but in a way that reaches deeply into who we are. “I know my own and my own know me,” Jesus says, describing himself as the good shepherd.

Sometimes our lives can feel very impersonal. For a good portion of the 21 years I've lived in my house, my water bill was addressed to 'occupant.' I am known

to others as a series of numbers – everything from my driver’s license to Social Security to bank accounts. When my birthday rolls around I get friendly cards from places that regard me as a future customer: insurance companies, even the local cremation society. They might have some of my data, but they don’t really know me.

We all know the difference between being known superficially and being known by someone who loves and cares for us. But we do have people in our lives with whom we are free to be exactly who we are. We can share most anything that is on our minds. People who will tell us the truth, wipe away our tears or laugh with us – who will support us in prayer.

Like that floppy lamb held by the shepherd, we also have a need to be held – but not just in a physical way. There is another kind of holding that surrounds us when we need support. The British psychologist W. H. Winnicott calls this the ‘holding environment’ - a safe and secure place where we are sheltered until we can move on. This could be the care and the love that our dearest friends and loved ones offer us and also the care and the love that the shepherd offers.

And that kind of holding is more than just a safe place. A few years ago our former presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, led our clergy through a clergy conversation on being the Church in the 21st century – a place in time that is proving to be quite a challenge at many levels as we continue to be the flock of Jesus.

But before we got into the complexities and challenges of these times in which we live, Katharine began in a more basic place. She began with some

reflection on what it means to be God's beloved. To be held, understood, accepted, cherished by our God. It was an image not unlike the Good Shepherd – gathering us in, keeping us safe. It was clearly good news.

Her point was that this sense of being beloved of God doesn't go away, even when we are navigating through complicated times. It is as if that 'holding environment' – that place of being held – is what makes us strong as we go forward.

That's a safe space like the secure arms of the good shepherd. A place to gather strength, to prepare for the next step, the next challenge. It is a place where we are held lovingly and then sent forward.

There's a traditional Easter blessing that we often pray during this season with an image taken from Hebrews, that speaks of Jesus as the great shepherd of the sheep. It asks God to make us 'perfect in every good work' – work that is pleasing to God.

May the loving care of the Good Shepherd be like that for us. Holding us close and sending us forth to be God's people, God's agents of healing, in this complicated world where we live.

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