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Acts 4: 5 – 12  
1 John 3: 16 – 24Ps. 23  
John 10: 11 – 18

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A number of years ago, I had the wonderful opportunity of taking a group of young people on pilgrimage to Italy. Our first stop was Rome and, of course, we visited the catacombs. The catacombs are where some early Christians buried their dead. More than sixty different catacombs have been discovered, but only a few are open to the public. We went to one known as “Priscilla’s Catacomb.”

Within Priscilla’s Catacomb is a particular chamber known as the Greek Chapel. Up in a fresco on the ceiling of this vaulted subterranean room is the earliest known depiction of Jesus. It is Jesus as the Good Shepherd. As with much of the rest of early Christian art, Jesus appears very ordinary and very human. The image could be almost any male shepherd (and yes, there were female shepherds). The figure is young, with short hair and no beard, dressed more in the style of mid-second century Rome than of first-century Palestine, but the difference is not great. Slung over the young man’s shoulders and across his chest are bags or baskets of some sort. Perhaps the bags contain tools that the shepherd might need to cut away thistles or free entangled sheep. Perhaps they contain food, or even treats to lure back straying sheep.

A sheep rests, rather precariously, around the young man’s neck while two other sheep stand on either side of him. Perhaps the sheep on his shoulders is meant to represent the ‘lost sheep’ which the Good Shepherd has gone after and brought safely back. Or perhaps this is one of the sheep of another fold that the shepherd has brought to join the others. Birds roost in the rather spindly trees that flank the figure. There is nothing inherently Christian about this image except for its overall context: a prominent figure below this shepherd image is shown in the ‘orans’ or prayer position. Four peacocks, whose flesh was believed not to rot and who thereby represented eternal life, frame the central scene.

The scene is bucolic and pastoral, perhaps even stereotypical of other Roman vignettes decorating not only catacombs but the walls, floors and ceilings of regular houses. Shepherds, as well as fish and fishermen, vines and grapes and other common representations of rural life, were all standards of early Roman design. And this shepherd image, though explicitly Christian by its context, is not so far removed from pagan art and images of the Greek god, Hermes, or his Roman counterpart, Mercury, whose roles were also to protect the flocks.

Clearly, many of the themes of early Christian art simply adapted already existing subject matter from Jewish synagogue art and Greco-Roman pagan art. Partly, perhaps, because the metaphors were already so compatible with Jesus’ use of rural imagery in parables and other parts of Scripture. Partly, also, because familiar imagery would help pagans understand the Christian message and ease their conversion. Partly, too, because in times of persecution, the art could be easily reconciled with existing art and it would not draw undue attention.

However, this fresco in Priscilla’s Catacomb is *not* a pagan image or just a random, pastoral scene for decoration. Rather, it is the earliest known shepherding image of Christ that reminded the Christians who saw it not only of their hope for resurrection, but of their relationship with Jesus. This image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is perhaps the predominant understanding of Christ for the early church. Not until later does Christian art (and theology) focus on such subjects as the nativity and crucifixion. So, the idea of a divine figure who, as a model shepherd, is dependable, who leads, who

nurtures, who is safe and who keeps the sheep safe, who provides for, who seeks after, and who loves the sheep more than self is the overarching understanding of Jesus for the early Christians. And that deep-down longing for, and experience of, such a God is why the image is still so comforting and familiar to most Christians.

Shepherding, of course, is a commonplace vocation in the time of Jesus. Jesus uses the image of the Good Shepherd because it is something to which his listeners can relate. Jesus' Jewish audience is familiar with shepherding, if not in person, then through such heroes of the faith as Abel, son of Adam and Eve, who keeps flocks; Abraham, traveling with his flocks everywhere God leads him; Abraham's grandson, Jacob, who shepherds fourteen long years to win the hand of his bride, Rachel; Moses, tending the flocks of his father-in-law in Midian, when he encounters the burning bush; David, the shepherd-boy-turned-King; and Amos, called to a life of prophesying from shepherding. Other authors of Scripture, such as Ezekiel, repeatedly point out to the recalcitrant Israelites how God cares for the people of God as a shepherd cares for a flock. And the author of the twenty-third psalm even more explicitly extolls the virtues of God as shepherd.

By extension, the Jewish religious leaders had long been considered shepherds, but, as in any group of people, not all shepherds could be counted upon for all the right qualities. Jesus compares himself to the ones who, up until now, have been left in charge of the flock but who have been found lacking. The leaders of the nation of Israel have not been shepherds so committed to their flock that they are willing to lay down their lives for them. These false shepherds have not tended to the needs of the flock, nor have they been faithful or dependable enough so that the flock knows the sound of their voices. Nor do these false shepherds care enough to know the members of the flock as individuals with specific needs and characteristics. And names. In so many words, the leaders of the people of God have led the flock astray; they have not defended them from predators; they have not guided the flock in right pathways. They have not been willing to risk injury to themselves or their positions, and so they are nothing more than hired hands who couldn't care less about the sheep. Except, perhaps, for fleecing them.

In contrast, Jesus reveals himself to be the Good Shepherd, the true shepherd, the one spoken of by the prophets and in the psalms. In the Greek, the word we translate as "good" really means something more like 'noble' or 'model' or some ideal of perfection. It is the opposite of what has been demonstrated by the imperfect leaders of the people of God. Jesus will be the model of commitment and integrity, of tenderness and guidance, of knowing and being known. Jesus will lead the sheep safely through the valley of death to dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

But what has all that to do with us? Chances are that no one in here has ever personally known a shepherd, though perhaps we have seen some in our travels. And chances are that no one in here appreciates the comparison to being a sheep, and would prefer the analogy to break down at that point. Well, perhaps then what we need to take home with us is the question of how can we live into the image of Christ as Good Shepherd? How can we, as the Body of Christ here at Trinity, not be merely uninvested, unconcerned hired hands, but rather be completely committed to the safety and nurturing of others so as to lead them safely home to God?

What kind of voice do we have – or might we develop – so that the sheep will recognize within us the voice of God calling *them* by name? How might we get to know the individual sheep out there by name, so that we know their needs and desires and can help provide for them? Where do we need to

go to seek out the lost and the wounded, to find the sheep of other folds? In other words, how are we to provide a ministry of reconciliation?

In ancient times, a shepherd was said to 'prepare the table' for the sheep by clearing the fields of thorns and poisonous plants, snakes, scorpions and other predators. What preparatory work, what obstacles, are we being called to remove so that others may safely graze and find the bountiful blessings of God which we have found?

Also in ancient times, in the evening, shepherds would gather the sheep who had been wounded or become sick during the day. After anointing wounds with wine or oil for cleansing, and giving the animals a restorative concoction of fermented herbs and honey, the injuries would be bound up so as to heal properly. Where is God calling us to a ministry of healing, of binding up the wounded, of restoration and redemption?

Like a good shepherd keeping watch over the flock by night, how do we find a way to welcome others – the sheep of other folds, the lost and the strayed, the abused and neglected, into our sheepfold for safekeeping? Where are we called to be vigilant to protect others against the evils which lurk in darkness? In what way might we be being called to lay down our lives for the life of the world?

We can't do all of these things, or really any of these things, without the help of God. And we can only be shepherds for others if we allow ourselves the vulnerability of seeing ourselves as the truly helpless, defenseless sheep in need of direction and nurturing that we are. Only if we listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd and know it intimately can we then teach that voice to others. Only in living together as a flock can we find the unity that the Good Shepherd offers to all. Only by accepting the love of the Good Shepherd can we live that love for others. Who Jesus is for us determines who we as a community – sometimes a flock and sometimes a shepherd – are for others.

"I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus. May we strive to be both faithful sheep and faithful shepherds for the sake of Jesus Christ. +