

Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 21, 2018, Year B

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church – Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Rector

Scripture: John 10:11-16

***“He Is Always Good”***

The image of a shepherd is a timeless one. When you think about a shepherd you don't think about technology, or GPS, or vehicles – the image is a simple one that is all about the relationship between the sheep and their shepherd, even to this day. Jesus describes this kind of relationship earlier in John chapter 10 when He says, *“The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.”* (John 10:2-6) The relationship between the shepherd and his sheep is due to the many, many hours that they spend together and the loving but stern care that he gives to them. They know his voice. Somebody else can come to the sheepfold and they will not go near him at all, even if he calls out their correct names. Yes, the sheep have names. I would bet that if I asked you for your pet's names, you might even be able to tell me their names when you were young. There is a relationship. How would you like to have 100 sheep that you tend, or 50- and you know not only their characteristics – but their names. You relate to them and treat each one accordingly. We all have dogs and cats that we know what they like or don't like – and we work with them about that. There is a relationship. The sheep are always listening for the one voice that matters, the voice they trust. When they hear it, the shepherd won't need a sheepdog to keep them in line; he won't walk behind them. To be driving them on He walks ahead of them, calling to them, and they simply follow him.

In today's Gospel Jesus further describes not only the role of the shepherd, but how Jesus is our shepherd – calling Himself the “Good Shepherd.” The words “good shepherd” used here in Greek are *ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλὸς* - (ha poimeyn ha kalows) which describe a person who is good – useful, free from defects, morally good, noble and praise worthy. To take it a step further – the literal translation of *καλὸς* is beautiful – relaying the fact that the sheer attractiveness of what He is doing and the strong, compelling power of His love for those under His care.

When I hear the term “good” I am taken to “The Chronicles of Narnia” specifically to a conversation that takes place in “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.” In chapter 8 of that book there is a conversation between young Lucy, her sister Susan, and Mr. Beaver about Aslan the lion – who is a character representing Jesus – who sacrifices himself for the people. Parts of the conversation goes like this as Lucy asks “*is, is he a man? Mr. Beaver says, “Aslan a man... certainly not.” “Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion.’ ‘Ooh’ said Susan. ‘I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion...’ ‘Safe?’ said Mr. Beaver ... ‘Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.’*”

He is not safe, but He's good. This speaks to me as it illustrates that God's love is not safe, certainly not in today's society, but we can trust Him because we know that He is good! Jesus

proclaimed Himself “*the Good Shepherd*” and His love is overflowing, enduring and never ending.

A shepherd would take his sheep into the wild, where his life was always in danger, and so too does Jesus. Wherever we go, wherever we have gone – even to some not so nice places, our Shepherd is with us. The Good Shepherd did indeed lay down His life for His sheep – sacrificing Himself before all others – so that those who believe in Him as the Only Son of God, would be safe from the “thief, the stranger, the hired hand” who cares nothing about the sheep and will hit the road when the “wolf” attacks – but the Good Shepherd never runs away, but instead defends them, pursues those who reject Him, loves those who hate Him and serves those who never acknowledge Him. This love may seem kind of confusing and irrational, why would Jesus chase someone who does not want to be chased? His love is so selfless - He doesn't care if He gets hurt in the process.

Hear what the Lord foretold through His prophet Ezekiel in chapter 34: *"I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. "* 'As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: *I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats."* (Ezekiel 34:11-17)

In the Old Testament – God was often seen in the image of the shepherd of His people. Look at today's Psalm – Psalm 23, written by the shepherd David, which begins with the words “*The Lord is my shepherd.*” The Prophet Isaiah describes the Lord God as He tends his flock like a shepherd: “*He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*” (Isaiah 40:11) The Psalmist writes in Psalm 80:1-2 “*Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us.*” When Jesus proclaimed Himself as the “*good shepherd*” I believe He spoke with certainty and authority – saying to us, His people, the people of God, saying, “*I Am the Good Shepherd...*” that He made the connection for us not only to the many Scriptures about God as a shepherd, but that He is God, Himself! Just as God spoke to Moses as the burning bush in Exodus 3:6 when He said, “*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.*” In chapter 3 verse 14 after Moses asked God what His name was He replied: “*I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to*

you.” In Jesus’ saying, *“I am the Good Shepherd”* He was telling the world that *“I AM WHO I AM.”* Jesus said the very same thing, when He said these words:

- *“I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life,”*
- *“I am the resurrection and the life”*
- *“I am the bread of life”* (born in a city called ‘the house of bread.’)
- *“I am the gate”*
- *“I am the vine”*
- *“I am the Light of the world”*

We stand on those Words as Jesus revealing to the whole world His true identity. Every time Jesus uses the words “I AM” my spirit is stirred, and I am led back to Exodus chapter 3 that God Himself is speaking. The Greek words Ἐγώ εἰμι (ego aimee) are the words “I AM” and they poignantly speak about someone who was, who is, and who will be forever. The verb “to be” “I Am.” God Himself is speaking and His love and invitation is indeed for the whole world – even though, sadly we know there are some who refuse to accept Him or try to change His words to something that the culture would rather hear. Pray for those people!

In today’s Holy Gospel reading, Jesus proclaimed *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”* (John 10:11) This is shortly before Jesus goes to the other side of the Jordan to await word that Lazarus has died. He then goes and brings Lazarus forth – which we celebrated just a few weeks ago. He brought Lazarus forth from the tomb, and then He headed to Jerusalem, triumphantly coming through and hailed as a King, in the last week of His life. He was proclaiming to those who would listen, and to those who would later follow, like us, that He is the Good Shepherd. He us the One who cares for His flock. He went on to say that He and the Father are One as He proclaimed, *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”* (John 10:14-16) We cannot wait for that day! Once again, God is not interested in losing anyone – but the choice to hear His voice is theirs. The invitation is there. Just think of John 3:16 – the word world is not just one denomination or Coffee County, or New York or Israel – the world – and your name is in there.

We are called to love like Christ loves us, not caring about the consequences or the aftermath. We are called to walk on treacherous ground in His love knowing He will never let us fall. He always works for the good of those who love Him. His love is not safe, but He is always good!