



Fourth Sunday of Easter
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May 12, 2019
Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Two men are floating in a boat, lost at sea. They ran out of food a couple of days ago, and ran out of water just today, so naturally they're pretty desperate. Out on the water, one of them spies a genie's lamp, and they both frantically paddle towards it. One of them pull out the lamp and rubs it, and lo and behold, a genie pops out!

"Will you grant us three wishes?" the first man pleads. "I'd love to, but this old genie's barely got enough magic left for just the one. So wish carefully."

Quickly, the second man calls out, "I wish the ocean would turn to beer!" "Consider it done." The genie and the lamp disappear, and the entire ocean changes from water to beer.

The first guy looks at the second one, stunned, then finally roars, "You idiot! Now we have to pee in the boat!"

All the usual morals apply in this case: be careful what you wish for, beware of seemingly easy solutions, etc., but on this Fourth Sunday of Easter – a Sunday we sometimes call Good Shepherd Sunday – I'm interested in the dynamics of being lost. Not just lost in the religious sense, where one feels separated from God, but lost in the more general sense – where one doesn't really know what to do or how to handle a particular situation in life. What about those times in life when we're like the two men in the boat – lost in an open sea where there seem to be no good choices or no choices at all?

This is called Good Shepherd Sunday because three of our four readings today use the imagery of Shepherds and Sheep: Psalm 23, the passage from Revelation, and our reading from the Gospel of John. The image of Jesus as a Shepherd – as one who guides and leads us – is found throughout the New Testament but it is especially prominent in John's Gospel. That imagery continued to be prominent in the early history of Christianity as well.

Interestingly, use of the images of Jesus the Good Shepherd as a symbol for Christianity were more prevalent in the early days of Christianity than images of the cross. Archaeologists have found many images of the Good Shepherd in Christian places of burial and worship dating back as far as the second century A.D., but images of the cross are not found as prominently until later, around the fourth and fifth century. Obviously, the cross of Christ was a key piece of imagery from the beginning but early Christians in places like Antioch and Rome seem to have found the Good Shepherd imagery often more compelling as a subject of artistic expression.

One reason for this might be found in the ancient Greek and Roman culture. For some centuries before Jesus the god Hermes was represented in art as a Good Shepherd. Hermes was, among other things, a messenger who brought word from the other gods to mortals as well as a shepherd and guide to those who were lost. He was especially believed to be a special kind of guide – a Psychopompos, a god who guided the dead from this world to the life of the world to come. So, it would seem, that many early Greek and Roman Christians saw in Jesus a Good Shepherd who was even better than the old Shepherd Hermes: a messenger, a guide and Shepherd for the lost, in whom they could truly place their trust.

The Good Shepherd imagery also had a long tradition in Judaism prior to Jesus. We can easily see that for ourselves in our Psalm for today, Psalm 23. The Jewish people regarded King David as the greatest of their kings, appointed by God to shepherd and guide his people and traditionally believed to be the author of Psalm 23. And one of the defining characteristics of David was that before he became King he was a you guessed it: a shepherd.

So, for Jews and Romans alike who were embracing Christianity in those early centuries, the Good Shepherd imagery was already powerfully resonant in their lives. But why would those ancient people have set aside Hermes and King David as their shepherds and turned to Jesus? What is so compelling about Jesus that causes us to leave what we have known and follow him towards something new?

I think that our text in Revelation holds a clue for us. In John's vision he sees heaven and when he looks at the throne of God, surrounded by worshipers, he sees that the one they are worshiping is not some remote being in resplendent light, not some old man with a long beard, or simply some ethereal idea of goodness. The one they are worshiping is a lamb. The message is clear: the one who is our Shepherd is also one of the sheep. We are God's flock, we are the lambs of God, and the Shepherd we have been given to guide us is also one of

us – a lamb just like us. And not only a lamb like us but a sacrificial lamb, a suffering sheep, one who has suffered as we have suffered.

Jesus is truly the Good Shepherd because he is both Shepherd and sheep, he is fully God and fully human, completely capable of leading and guiding us while at the same time completely understanding and empathizing with how it feels to be a lost sheep wandering and trying to find our way in a hostile world. I believe that what the ancients found compelling about Jesus is the very thing that is still compelling about him: he is not just a god or just a human being. He is both, he is God in flesh and blood, uniting our frail, lost human nature to the immortal divine nature, and therefore he is not only a Good Shepherd like Hermes and David, he is the Best Shepherd we could hope for.

As Jesus says in today's gospel, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish."

I'll finish with this question, then: do we know his voice? Honestly, we often have trouble hearing him, don't we? We often have to slow our lives down, take extra time for quiet meditation and prayer, and listen together with other believers in order to be able to distinguish what the prophet Elijah called the "still, small voice," that comes after the roaring wind. We often feel lost – in every sense of the word, whether it is separation from God or not knowing what to do next – we often feel lost because cannot hear Jesus' voice or we have not yet heard it.

Do you know what advice the experts give to those who are lost? Stand still and wait for someone to find you. If you truly don't know where you are, continuing to move in a certain direction can often just exhaust and dehydrate you while making it harder for rescuers to locate you. The Scriptures give the same advice: "stand still and see the salvation of the Lord" God says to Moses at the Red Sea and Joshua at Jordan River. That is, in essence, what Jesus said to the disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. "Put your swords away, stand still, and see the new thing God is about to do."

If God seems distant today, if you're not sure what to do next in your life, or if you don't really know who are or what you're meant to be doing, the best thing you can do is stop and listen for Jesus' voice. You belong to him, you'll know his voice when you hear it, but you might have to stand still to be able to hear. And by the way, standing still doesn't mean doing nothing. Standing still means praying, hearing the scriptures, receiving

the bread and wine, and being in communion with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because it is in the prayers, in the scriptures, in the bread, the wine, and the people of God, that Jesus will speak to us and lead us.

And so, we'll end as we began this service: with the collect of the day. O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.