

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Fourth Sunday of Easter
St. John 10:11-18

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

There are times when really appreciate the Gospel of John and the other literature that community produced, like the three Epistles of John. It clarifies many questions left after reading Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It holds many profound insights into the development of our understanding of who Christ is and the spiritual depth of the Eucharist, for example, and it also puts great emphasis on the personal connection (“Abide in me and I in you” and “Love one another as I have loved you”). It’s probably an oversimplification, but the Rule of Life for this community appears to have been believe in Jesus, love each other and listen to the Holy Spirit who will teach you everything you need to know. It all sounds so personal and intimate. And with the promised individualized instruction of the Holy Spirit, everyone can become their own priest and their own theological expert. There were no creeds to study, no certified teachers to instruct and only fledgling communities to who people were accountable. What’s the problem? Just that.

Scholars believe that John, writing some time around 90 to 100 AD., is addressing the development of what we call the Gnostic movement in the church that pitted Christian group against Christian group for the next several hundred years. It would become the battle between the orthodox and heterodox, the true believers and the heretics. John, in today’s passage, addresses the problem of false teachers drawing people away from the churches he was writing to by teaching an altered message of Christ—that maybe He wasn’t crucified; or if He was crucified, He didn’t die. Some taught that Jesus was not the light coming into the world. He came instead to uncover the light that was already in us. John doesn’t call those false teachers sheep-stealers, but hired hands, which means they charged for their teaching. They were in it for the money; so when danger comes calling, they’re out the back door, leaving the sheep defenseless and free to wander away and get lost. John is adamant in today’s passage that Jesus cares so much for the sheep that He lays down His life for them. And like St. Paul who was a tent-maker, the clergy did not depend solely on the welfare of the community, but supported themselves by their trade. The true believers

knows who they follow because they recognize His presence with them—they hear His voice as surely as Mary heard Jesus call her name on Easter morning. He is still present with us to guide, feed and protect. In other words, He is like a Good Shepherd. And there must be one flock, and one shepherd.

Shepherding is not as widespread or as common today as it was in ancient days. This makes it a little difficult for those of us who preach as well as those of you who listen to sermons who know very little about sheep and shepherding. I don't know much, except for what I can read from a book or glean from the Bible.

When Ezekiel the Prophet talks about shepherds, he's talking about the kings and queens of Israel. And what he talks about is how disgraceful a job they had done guiding, feeding and protecting the Lord's flock, Israel. "You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals" (Ez 34.1-10). Prophecy to the shepherds, said the Lord to Ezekiel, and tell them "I am against the shepherds, and I will demand my sheep at their hand... I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them." The Lord Himself will be their shepherd.

Sometimes when I read the 23rd Psalm, I think that if all we had of the 900-page Old Testament was this one-page Psalm, it would be enough for us to know our God. Most of you have seen those famous painting of Jesus carrying the lost sheep. It is bucolic and peaceful. The shepherd is handsome, relaxed, at ease and with posture unbent. He looks soft. What I read about shepherding paints a completely different picture, however. Shepherding, especially in the Middle East, was hard work. Vegetation was sparse and required constant searching. If the sheep were found grazing on somebody's property, the shepherd could find himself in legal trouble as well. That is why shepherds in the ancient world had such a poor reputation. They were often considered thieves. Wild animals were a constant threat

and to make matters even worse, while you were on the watch for predators, sheep-stealers were always looking to increase their wealth at your expense. And, of course, all those risks were only intensified at night. Shepherding was hard work and shepherds had to be tough.

And, from what I've read, shepherds didn't lead the flock from in front but drove them from behind. There's an old joke that says that God created sheep to make chickens look smart! Let's face it: sheep are not the brightest of animals. If you were out in front, they would wander to wherever the next shiny bauble was. You drove them from behind using your crook to pull the wandering back in and your eyes and rod ready for predators. It would be so much easier, wouldn't it, if our Good Shepherd were out in front of us giving clear directions and pointing out the way. Instead the Shepherd is behind us—we hear the voice but don't often see the clear signals of direction. Being in the Lord's flock requires careful listening and a sense that we are a flock who need each other to help us hear Him and know Him.

What is it that makes our Shepherd "Good?" When the gods of Mt. Olympus look down and make jokes about how stupid we are, the Shepherd doesn't laugh. Instead of being anxious about our tendency to wander, the Good Shepherd is content to be with us—even when we do stupid things. He picks us up when we fall, He feeds our hunger, calms us down, and mends our broken spirit. He works to keep us together and safe; He searches for us when we are lost, and supports us when we're falling behind. And that's worth a celebration of Good Shepherd Sunday once a year, wouldn't you say?