

Easter 4b: 4/22/18
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*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,
forever and ever. Amen.*

If it's the Fourth Sunday of Easter (and it is)
then it's Good Shepherd Sunday.
Every year on this day we hear one section or another
of this lovely passage from John's Gospel
in which Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd caring for his flock.

In my old parish in North Branford there's a painting about this
that hangs over the altar in the children's chapel.
There's Jesus – rather dashing, actually,
his hair and robes gently moving in the breeze,
as he carries a fluffy white sheep to safety.

A sweet image to nurture children in the faith.
There are days in my life too --
sometimes strings of days –
when I wouldn't mind staying right there in that picture.
Cozy. Comfortable. Cocooned.

But that's not the whole picture of the Good Shepherd.
A shepherd's work is relentless. Fearless. Full of sacrifice.
Jesus says as much right in today's passage when he refers,
repeatedly, to laying down his life for his sheep.
Being a shepherd can be a matter of life and death.

Just this week I've noticed quite a lot of images of good shepherds
tending those entrusted to their care.

The Southwest Airlines pilot, Tammie Jo Shults,
who maneuvered that flaming jetliner with the failed engine

to a soft emergency landing outside Philadelphia this week.
Surely she was a very good shepherd carrying her flock to safety.

Those solemn pictures from St. Martin's Episcopal Church
in Houston, where secret service agents stood guard
at the coffin of former First Lady Barbara Bush?
Having shepherded her to safety for so many years in this life
they chose to shepherd her to the end.

The young people organizing their peers --
and even many of us grown-ups – around gun violence.
You don't have to agree with them on everything
to respect that at an age when many of us were totally carefree
they've taken the initiative to shepherd
themselves (and the rest of us) towards greater gun safety.

Right here in town we see a similar impulse in our young people.
Wasn't it wonderful that the Lyman Hall and Sheehan softball teams
came together this week to support and raise funds for
those two Sheehan football players so seriously injured
in a car accident last month?
Not yet back in school with long recoveries ahead of them,
they wanted those boys to know that they were *still* part of the flock.

Each of these vignettes form a fuller picture
of the Good Shepherd Jesus is to us,
and that he models for us to be for others.

Late in John's Gospel, the metaphor of sheep comes up again.
It's the very last chapter, Jesus' very last post-resurrection appearance
to the disciples.

It's a glorious moment – they're having breakfast on the beach!
Knowing this will be his final chance to remind them
of the most important thing in this life, Jesus asks Peter,
"Do you love me?"

"Oh, yes, Lord, you know that I love you," he answers.

To which Jesus says: "Tend my sheep."

In all, Jesus gives Peter – who had denied him three times –
three blessed times to say that he'd loved him all along.

Oh what sweet relief, what healing,
for Peter to know that Jesus accepted his love
and welcomed him back, unconditionally, into the flock.

And with each of those three assurances of love,
Jesus entrusts Peter, as he entrusts each of us,
with taking care of – with *shepherding* – others.
“Feed my lambs,” says Jesus. “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.”

That's it. That's what it's all about.

There are times in this life when we need to be embraced,
comforted and carried across the finish line.
There are times when we need to be brought back into the fold
when we've wandered far astray.
Times when we need to be fed and tended.

But we are in this together. We are one flock.
And Jesus the Good Shepherd guides us in order to follow him,
to *be more like him*,
to shepherd one another and
this whole world God so loves
into paths of righteousness, goodness and mercy.

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