

## SERMON: 4 EASTER C

**John 10:22-30** & Revelation 7:9-17 & Psalm 100  
*Preached Sunday, April 29, 2007 at St. Philip's, Brevard*

Today is known traditionally as "Good Shepherd Sunday." On the fourth Sunday of Easter each year, we hear Scriptures which describe Jesus as the Good Shepherd and us — his followers — as the sheep.

Even before the time of Jesus, the psalmist used the same analogy to speak about God and the people of God: "We are [God's] people and the sheep of his pasture" (100:3). For most of us, these are familiar and comforting images. I like to think of myself as one of the sheep, lovingly tended by the Shepherd who created me, redeemed me, and beckons me towards holiness. In times of trial, I need to hear that God watches over me and looks out for my well being.

In the Gospel reading today, we hear Jesus the Good Shepherd make some big promises about the sheep. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 20:27-28).

Soothing, comforting, wonderful words. Words many of us long to hear in a time of widespread change and anxiety. Comforting, yes — but only if we leave them sitting on the surface of our mind, heart, and lips. They are soothing if we don't ask any deeper questions.

But sometimes, we cannot simply accept such words at face value, even if they come from the mouth of our Lord. In my mind's eye, I can picture one of the sheep standing near the back of the flock, listening to these words of the Good Shepherd. He's a curious sheep, prone to wander off and explore the forest and river near the sheep fold.

After hearing these comforting words, he thinks to himself, "Yes, Lord, you are the Good Shepherd. I want to believe that I will never perish and that no one can snatch me out of your hand.... But what about planes that demolish skyscrapers in fire and ash? What about life-threatening diseases which threaten to cut short young lives? What about crazy people who get hold of deadly weapons? What about wars that stretch on for years, bringing devastation to those who are injured or killed? What about earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and hurricanes? And what about innocent children who suffer from abuse, starvation or poverty? Are they also the sheep of God's pasture? And what can you say, Jesus, when these terrible things happen and snatch some sheep out of your hand?"

This is one of the most challenging questions of our faith: how can we make sense of suffering and evil if God is great and Jesus is, indeed, the Good Shepherd? I can tell you that, at times, I have been that curious little sheep standing at the back of the flock, unable to prevent myself from thinking such things. And with all the recent bad news, I have been asking those questions anew.

Before we delve into this, I want to make one caveat: there is a limit to anyone's ability to give a fully satisfying answer to such questions. With our imperfect knowledge, no one will ever fully plumb the depths of this great mystery — at least not in this life. Like Job, I have to recognize that, sometimes, a question is simply too deep for me to fathom.\* Nevertheless, our faith can guide us in the right direction.

First off, let's be clear about what Jesus is and isn't promising in regard to the sheep. He is not saying that no physical harm will ever come to them. He says, "I give them eternal life." We can trust that promise. Those who belong to the Good Shepherd will be with him for eternity. Jesus is giving us absolute assurance about our spiritual fate. In this mortal life, we will face grave temptations, suffering and loss. But if we stick with the Good Shepherd, the Evil One will have no power over our souls. No one is guaranteed a life without risk, pain or grief. And Jesus never said following him would be a bed of roses.

Years ago, a Jewish rabbi wrote a book called "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." The author, Harold Kushner, makes some excellent points for people struggling with a death or other losses. I still recommend the book from time to time. But I have one problem with it, and that is the title. It presumes that there is a category of people for which bad things shouldn't happen — the "good people." And my question is, Who are these "good people" for whom bad things are never supposed to happen? Why should they be exempt from the trials, tribulations and frailties of this mortal life? Jesus noted that God makes "the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). I do not believe that bad things happen as punishment for our bad behavior. Lamentations 3, verse 33 reminds us that God "does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." By the same token, I do not believe that God rewards good behavior by shielding us from pain and suffering. The teachings of Jesus simply do not support this notion.

So this is my first point: that Jesus assures us of eternal life, but does not promise anyone immunity from harm or loss.

Second, there is a big difference between this life and the next. Several years ago, there was a popular song with the title, "Heaven is a Place On Earth." Can you believe the willful naïveté of the title? I think it must have been written by someone who never looked at the state of the world around him.

In the second reading today, we have a vision of eternal life, and it is breathtaking. Believers from throughout the world are gathered around the throne, worshiping and singing praises night and day. The writer of the vision is told that the multitudes dressed in white robes are those who have “come out of the great ordeal” (7:14).

John was probably talking about Christians who faced persecution, including the martyrs who were killed because of their faith. But they might also include anyone who perseveres in their faith despite the temptations and trials of this life. One day soon, that multitude might include you and me. So when we are burdened by our own losses or the suffering of others around us, please remember that this life is not the sum total of our existence. There is another chapter of life which awaits us. In that place, the Good Shepherd is the Lamb of God, and he will give us shelter. In that place, “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (vv. 16-17).

Third, and most importantly, we must recognize that God’s intention for the world is not pain, suffering and loss. The dream of God is for us and every created thing to be well and whole, to be abide in peace and contentment. Life on earth is often not this way, however, for many reasons. God gave us free will, and I believe it is truly free. Individuals are free to use it well or abuse it. We are not puppets on the end of strings. The terrible spiritual reality is that God would rather not have us if we do not come in freedom. And some people freely choose to turn away from God — with disastrous consequences for themselves and others.

Here’s another way to say it: the world we live in is filled with the consequences of sin. But let’s not blame God for the ungodly choices made by human beings. God is not at fault when dangerous weapons are readily available and terrorists or unstable people use them to wreak havoc. God is not at fault when man-made carcinogens in our air, water or food cause cancer. God is not at fault when nations are unwilling to seek peaceful solutions to their disputes. God is not at fault when wealthy nations are too selfish to share their abundance with the millions who are dying from preventable illnesses. And God is not at fault when evil people neglect or abuse innocent victims. We ask that God’s will would be done “on earth as it is in heaven” because, too often, that is not what happens.

In my next sermon, I will say more about the will of God. Two weeks from now, I will explore the questions of why the world we live in so often doesn’t reflect that will, why evil persists, and what we as Christians can do about it. For now, let me summarize what’s been said:

- Jesus promises us eternal life, not a life without risk, pain or loss.
- Second, another chapter of life awaits us — and there, there will be no suffering, no death, no tears.
- Third, the will of God for us is wholeness and peace. But we live in a world distorted by the effects of human sin. And it is our job as believers to try to work with God to usher in the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

I close on this Good Shepherd Sunday with a remarkable prayer. It was written by a man in Scotland after a class of elementary school children and their teacher were massacred by a gunman in 1996. The only other time we've heard it at St. Philip's was the Sunday after Sept. 11, 2001.

This is a lengthy prayer, but it is so powerful that I want you to hear most of it:

"Lord God, we live in a world in which your presence is easily hidden. Today we find it hard to love you. As we reflect on the horrors of this week, we smolder with rebellion, even in the Church. Your way of managing the world seems wrong; your love and justice appear to be missing. It seems to be your fault, Lord. You made this world where tragedies occur. Why did you create the possibility of suffering?"

"Just now, life seems a jumble of fragments, where nothing ... fits together. A feeling of being lost has all but overwhelmed us.... You have placed within us a hunger for a better world, but we [seem to] lack the ability to build that world.... To whom can we turn?"

"Lord God, we come to you seeking forgiveness and fresh understanding. Have mercy upon us and upon our community.... You are the one who is present even in our distress, for through the cross of Jesus Christ you share in the oppression of all who are suffering.

"You are the light that never goes out. You are the eye that never closes. You are the ear that is never shut. You are the mind that never gives up. You are the heart that never grows cold, and you are the hand that never stops reaching. Come, Holy Spirit, and share your comfort. Breathe new life into those who are brokenhearted. Lift up those who are crushed. And bring healing to our land. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Pain-bearer. Life-giver. And faithful Friend."\*\*

AMEN.

*(Footnotes appear on the next page)*

\*Here, I have in mind Job's final response to God after Job's railing about the injustice of all the loss and suffering he endured: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know" (42:3).

\*\*By John Drane. In The Doubleday Prayer Collection, ed. Mary Batchelor (New York; Doubleday, 1997), p. 398.