

The Good Shepherd

Easter 4, Year B – Psalm 23

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson April 29, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia.

I have a confession this morning. To put it bluntly, I *hate* sheep. Not on the plate, you understand. With a little mint jelly and some fresh veggies on the side, a piece of lamb is wonderful. And properly grilled, a good lamb chop mighty nice. And though I missed out on it at Tri-Fest last week, I've even had barbecued mutton on a bun that I thoroughly enjoyed. It's sheep on the *hoof* that I despise.

As you may remember, I grew up in the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona in a house just like all the others on the street, which was just like the other streets in the development, which was... Well, you get the picture. Most of the houses had the same little patch of grass out front and a fenced-in backyard dominated by a flagstone patio. Our neighborhood had the usual assortment of dogs and cats, various pet rodents, and one time even a very confused peacock that had escaped from a local petting zoo. But as far as I can remember, there were never *any* farm animals in our neighborhood. In short I was a kid of the suburbs. For most of the first couple of decades of my life, my experience of living, breathing sheep was... well, none.

The summer after my first year of college, though, I spent several weeks living on the central Ohio farm of the Sandos, some friends of my parents. The Sandos worked a couple hundred acres of land and they raised an assortment of livestock. But mostly, the Sandos raised sheep. Suffolk sheep, to be precise, the ones with black heads and feet. During the day, I had a job away from the farm. But in the evenings and on weekends, I had the somewhat dubious privilege of working with the Sando kids, Donna and David, tending the family's "show flock."

Mind you, this little flock of fifteen or twenty sheep was demonstrably the finest group of Suffolks in Darke County, and maybe in the rest of Ohio as well. Kept in top shape and shown at fairs throughout the state to increase the prestige, and therefor the marketability of the larger enterprise, these sheep were blue ribbon winning, hands down best of show, exemplars of the sheep breeder's craft. They were the very *crem-d'-la-crem* of sheepdom. And I detested every furry one of them. They were stubborn, and they were stupid, and they stank.

You want to talk about sheer stubbornness? The infamous mule has nothing on sheep. On one occasion it was my turn to round up the flock from the large pen where they spent most of the day and put them in their stall in the barn for the night. As I shooed and hollered, waving my arms and cutting back and forth to get the group to head in the direction of the open barn door, I realized why dogs are usually employed for such a task. I finally got most of them headed in the right direction but one of them managed to get behind me. I secured the larger group and then, at least a little angry, I turned to the one that had gotten away. As I approached him, he turned and stuck his head through the slats of the fence. I yelled and waved my arms at him to get him turned around but he only pushed harder forward, against the wooden slats. Exasperated, I grabbed hold of his fleece and tried to *pull* him away from the fence. But the harder I pulled, the harder he pushed. By this time I was pretty disgusted with the obstinate beast. I jumped the fence and, standing right in front of him, yelled and waved my arms. In spite of the fact that I was making all this commotion right in his face, the sheep refused to back out of the fence, instead pushing even harder into the slats. Finally, in desperation, I slapped the animal's snout and shouted, "Get in there, you stubborn thing." But still the sheep dug his hooves in and tried with all his might to go forward *through* the fence. After we had both spent a good deal of energy, I was finally able to bend the sheep's head down and to one side, freeing it from the fence. "How could *anything*?" I thought, "be so darn stubborn?"

What's more, if you ever get the chance to watch a sheep shearing demonstration, you'll also witness the absolute height of animal stupidity. Sheep are pretty strong for their size. And their hooves are

really sharp. If you tried to do anything to any but the most docile of sheep you could very easily get badly hurt. Except sheep are *also* incredibly *stupid* for their size. If you turn a sheep over on its back, it suddenly becomes completely calm. If one of its feet is allowed to touch the ground, the sheep will resume its struggle as if its life depended on it. But as long as all four feet are off the ground, the animal is completely under control, and you can do just about anything to it. Is that stupid, or what?

And I told you that sheep stink, didn't I? When you look at sheep from a distance, their wool looks fluffy and light. I remember when I was a kid we made construction paper sheep in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School and covered them with those little cotton balls. I guess I expected real sheep to be like that. Let me tell you, *they are not!* Somewhere down under two to six inches of wool, sheep's skin excretes an oily substance that coats everything with which it comes in contact, a substance that stinks to high heavens. Couple that with the effects of the elements and the none too glamorous waste disposal system of the barnyard, and you have one of the smelliest, greasiest, purely *nastiest* creatures on Earth.

So you can maybe see why, when I read Scripture passages like those we read this morning, part of me resents being thought of as anything *like* a sheep.

I *hate* sheep!

But the very qualities that I found so utterly detestable about sheep, fourteen-year-old David Sando didn't consider even *slightly* objectionable.

When I expressed my disappointment at the smell and feel of the sheep's wool, David told me that the oil that comes from sheep's skin contains lanolin. That's what makes it smell so bad. But when a sheep gets scratched on thorn bushes or cut by a rock, or when the shearer cuts too close and nicks the sheep's skin, the lanolin soothes the pain and helps to heal the wound. In fact, when David would scratch himself in the course of his work, he would rub the wound with oil from one of the sheep.

When I told David that I thought it was a sign of stupidity that a sheep would go all limp when its feet lose contact with the ground, he smiled and said, "They're not stupid, they just know they're in no position to do anything else." "Besides that," he continued, "they trust me to take care of them."

And the evening I came to the supper table and related the story of the obstinate sheep that had persisted in pushing against the fence, the whole family laughed. Not at the sheep — at me. "Why did you try to chase them to the stall?" David chuckled. "They already want to go there. You only have to show them the right way to go." "Sure they only want to go forward." he said. "But you've gotta show them *which* forward. They count on you to know where *you're* going."

After that summer, I am much more informed, sheep-wise. But I still hate sheep. All the farm logic the Sando family could muster couldn't change the mind of this kid from the suburbs. But David Sando didn't hate sheep. The difference, I suppose, is that while I was a guy who worked with sheep, David was a *shepherd*. David knew that the sheep depended on him for everything and he was glad to see that they got it.

David was a shepherd and he loved those sheep. He had raised his first lamb as a 4-H project when he was only nine. Five years later, some of the members of this show flock were his current projects, raised by him from newborn lambs. David found the sheep, *his* sheep, neither smelly, nor stupid, nor stubborn. Or rather, he knew that they were all those things, and he loved them anyway.

I know I've gone past my normal time limit, but I need to tell you one more story about David and his sheep.

Most lambs are born in mid-spring, about this time of year. But occasionally, a ewe will become pregnant later in the season. These late pregnancies are nearly always more complicated than most.

The summer I was living with the Sandos, one of David's sheep had such a pregnancy. As the time for her lambing approached, there was an increased level of tension and anxiety in the whole household, but David was particularly affected. This ewe was one of those that he had raised from a newborn lamb. She was kept in a separate stall and David made sure that her every need was attended to. And when at last the ewe began labor, the whole family gathered in the barn to be with David and his ewe. As the hours dragged on and there was still no sign of delivery, Mr. Sando suggested that we all go on to bed. David, however, wouldn't be budged. "You go on," he said, "I'll stay here with her. I'll come

get you when the lamb comes.” The rest of us went into the house while Mr. Sando stayed behind with David for a few minutes, talking to David about things only shepherds understand, I suppose.

When we got up at the usual farm-early hour without news from David, we headed out to the barn as a group. When we got to the stall, the ewe lay there in the straw, dead. The heat, the exertion, and the other complications had been too much for her. David sat in the back of the stall, his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms wrapped around a tiny, newborn lamb, his face buried in its short wool. Mr. Sando spoke his name and David lifted his face. The sweat and dirt on his face was streaked with the trails of long dried tears. He looked up at his father, and choking back a sob, he said, “It’s over, Dad.”

I hate sheep. But David was a shepherd. He loved his sheep. When they needed to know which way to go, he led them. When they were afraid and dependent on him for their safety, he provided for them. When they needed their wounds attended to, he helped them to heal. Because David was a shepherd. David was *their* shepherd.

The Lord is *my* shepherd; I shall not be in want. When I don’t know the way, my shepherd “leads me beside the still waters” and “along right pathways.” When I’m afraid, when I know I’m helpless on my own, “I shall fear no evil, for my shepherd is with me.” When my wounds are deep, inflicted by the world or by my own willfulness, stubbornness, or stupidity, my shepherd “anoints my head with oil.” Surely, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia.