

Easter 4B, St John's Olney, 22 April 2018  
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen  
Acts 4:5-12; Ps 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

S.D.G.

Peace be with you. If you were paying attention last week, you know that greeting pretty much means - don't freak out, what follows may not be the best news you have ever heard, but don't freak out.

Jesus says, I am the Good Shepherd. That image is, for most of us, beautiful and serene. There are icons, and statues and windows of that image. Typically we see Jesus standing with a lamb draped around his neck and over his shoulders. Sometimes the image is of Jesus cradling a lamb in his arms as a parent would cradle a child. But lets take a moment and think about why a shepherd watches over sheep; what is the value of the sheep to the shepherd?

Yes, there is wonderful wool for sweaters and socks and shirts. But ultimately, there is lamb chops and stew. Sheep get sheared and slaughtered. I said, don't freak out, but if Jesus is the Good Shepherd and we are his flock - this might not end so nicely.

I wonder if as often as we all have looked at the three windows behind the altar, have we really studied them. For instance, there are three windows each with a vine, but there is only one vine. Next week we will hear Jesus say "I am the true vine." And in this window we see the one true vine. Jesus says "I am the vine, and you are the branches." He also says that the Father is the gardener who cuts the branches that don't bear good fruit. Don't freak out, but we have just been threatened with pruning shears.

Also in these windows, at the top center, we see the Lamb, Jesus the lamb of God; the Lamb who is to be sacrificed for us. With the lamb is also pictured a shepherds crook. Jesus, the great I Am, is the lamb and the shepherd; the alpha and the omega.

We, on the other hand, are simply part of the flock, ready to be sheared and then simmered in a cast iron pot; or we are a branch on the true vine waiting to see who gets trimmed and who bears fruit.

Metaphors are wonderful – until they are not. Most every metaphor will, if we follow it long enough, crumble under its own weight. The key is to know when to accept the metaphor and just stop.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd and we are the sheep. That is enough, the shepherd will care for the sheep and protect them from the evils of the wolf; being protected from the evil is enough, what happens after that is in God's hands.

Over the years I have been friends with quite a few military chaplains. None of these folks have served in a quiet area for more than a short period; most of their time was in war zones beginning with Vietnam and continuing to Iraq and Afghanistan. None carried a weapon. Each was assigned a shepherd who was instructed to stick to the chaplain like glue and never let any harm come to the chaplain. These young soldiers, serving as shepherd, were told to give their lives so that the chaplain would live. I have heard some chilling tales from these chaplains, experiences that can only be described as evil; but in these stories I always had a sense of the shepherd that we find in Ps 23:

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

The chaplains did not speak of the comfort provided by their soldier body-guard, they found that a bit uncomfortable; they spoke of the comfort found in God. Not only does Jesus protect us, Jesus has given his life so that we might live.

So that we might live is not about our deaths, but about our lives. How we live our lives matters.

John tells us that “we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

The soldiers who guarded and protected the chaplains did so under strict orders from an officer; it is entirely different to offer your life, offer your hand, offer a kind word in love of a neighbor. How we live our lives matters. How we live our lives can also be intimidating.

A teacher at the school shared a book with me last week, "The Dot" by Peter Reynolds. Spoiler alert, what follows gives away the story line: this is the story of a little girl who is intimidated by the blank paper facing her in art class, she is frozen in fear and says she can't draw. The teacher suggests she make a mark on the paper, any mark. With frustration Vashti jabs the paper with her pencil. After Vashti puts this single dot on the page the teacher looks at it carefully and then asks Vashti to sign it. The following week when entering the class Vashti notices that piece of paper is framed in a gold gilt frame and hung on the wall. Vashti then begins to make more dots, different colors, different sizes, different mediums. Soon a whole exhibit of Vashti's dots is hung in the school art show. At the show Vashti notices a little boy looking up at her, he says "you are such a good artist, I wish I could draw". Vashti encourages him but he says "I can't draw a straight line with a ruler." So she says - draw a line. Then Vashti looks carefully at the squiggly line and says "now sign it."

The Good Shepherd is with us, so we can make a mark in this world, whether that mark be a dot or a squiggly line, we can make a mark. The Good Shepherd is with us so that we can love our neighbor, so that we can offer our lives to each other; so that our lives become a dwelling place for Christ.

In the 1930's Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a prayer most of us are familiar with:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.*

In light of that wise counsel we can not change whether we are here for wool or stew, but we can change how we live our lives. We don't know if our branch will be pruned, but we can bring it to blossom; we can make a dot. We can go from following Jesus as a disciple to being an Apostle and going out in the world embodying Jesus in our lives.

We can make a space for God's love to abide in us so that we are able to love our neighbor and help our brother or sister when they are in need. It matters how we live our lives; that is why the Good Shepherd watches over us. It is about life not death, it is about living, not dying, it is about love.

Amen,