

All Saints Anglican (Episcopal) Church

Steenrijk

Leidenstraat at Heelsumstratt

Willemstad, Curacao

The Episcopal Diocese of Venezuela

Fourth Sunday of Easter (C)

May 8, 2022

DRAFT

“Mothering Sunday”

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to John

10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my 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. What my Father has given me is

greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.”

God, give us courage, give us hope, give us an ear to hear your voice as our Good Shepherd. Amen.

Every mother has a unique voice that their baby can recognize from inside their mother's womb. Once born, the voice sounds a bit different, but quickly a baby figures out who is caring for them. And our connection with our mothering figure

continues for the rest of our live. The caring of a mothering figure lasts for all our life. Even if we are adopted, we soon connect mothering with our mother, either our birth mother or our adopted mother. And a mother, quickly recognizes the voice of her child; that attachment lasts for the rest of our lives. So, mothers play a very special and dear role in everyone's life.

Mothering Sunday, today, also happens to be Good Shepherd Sunday. And in our Psalm 23 and the Gospel lesson we hear about the shepherd of all, the Lord our God.

My wife and I have found two puppies, actually grown dogs, who have adopted us as their caregivers at the medical school dorm. These two dogs have lived outside for most all of their life as have many other dogs in Curacao; one can see homeless dogs in many parking lots wandering around. I am not sure how this has happened, but in Antigua where we lived before coming here, there were dogs all over the place, on every street. They are the scavengers of these societies, eating whatever we humans discard for them. It is an ecological wonder that we seldom see in the United States where we throw away all discarded food,

even good food from grocery stores that could have been used to feed hungry human beings. That is a cruel fact of North American life. But a few places are trying to counteract that by getting discarded food from restaurants and bakeries and arranging daily feeding programs for the hungry. One of my first ministries was setting up a soup kitchen at St. Bartholomew's Church in midtown Manhattan; now they feed four hundred a day breakfast. And other groups pick up food from sources in New York and New Jersey and come to the sidewalk outside the church at night to feed many homeless people. Church feeding programs

there began in the 1990's and have grown ever since. So, the church has taken over the care of its children, adopted or otherwise. But the need for mothering seems never to cease; many times, males take on that responsibility, so it not just a female thing fortunately, since mothering is so very needed; and there are just not enough female mothers around.

Jesus recognizes our need for mothering, he tends to call it shepherding, to keep it from being gender dominated or gender mandated. In Jesus time, however, most all shepherds were males. So, our society is

slowly trying to return to its roots where both men and women can be shepherds of Christ's flock.

Jan and my excursion into a feeding program began one Sunday soon after I had become the Rector at St. John's in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and one Sunday we were eating a very nice prime rib lunch at a good restaurant down the street from the church, when we looked at each other and exclaimed, 'how many people could we feed in this impoverished city with the money we were spending on prime rib.'

So we found a Bible study program called “Alpha” which always included a lunch or dinner with each weekly Bible study, and we began after a brief advertising to do this Bible study; it started with eight people and eventually morphed into a Noonday Prayer worship service with over thirty in attendance every Sunday afternoon. Then, so many people began to come for the meal afterwards that we had to set up many more tables and chairs, and within four years we were feeding a hundred people every Sunday. And after I retired, that program has increased to 150 per Sunday, many more that could be seated inside, so the food is put

in plates and bags and handed out from the church front door; three or four other Episcopal Churches have now volunteered to help, so the feeding load on that church was lifted a bit. And several other churches and community programs have sprung up in Elizabeth, New Jersey, so starving people can find sandwiches to eat every day of the year. It is indeed a miracle.

Mothering is at the heart of love, I believe. We hopefully learn love and care from our mothers, and that care needs to be extended to others who had been not so well mothered as have we been. Mothering is a

huge responsibility, and not all mothers have the wherewithal to continue mothering beyond a few years of their child's life, so that is where the church love needs to take over. Christ is our Good Shepherd. Even without a living mother we hear Christ's voice and hopefully respond with Christ's love for others. We all are mother figures, and we need to take that responsibility seriously.

Today I think especially of all those mothers in the Ukraine and elsewhere who are concerned for their children, some nursing their newborn amid constant rockets

and bombings. This war and every war is such a tragedy. The world is slowly beginning to hear the cries of these children and mothers, and hopefully we will begin to respond more vigorously.

Let us continue to pray to our Risen Lord to help us care for others.

Alleluia, Christ has risen!

The Lord has risen indeed, Alleluia!

Amen.

Mothering Sunday

Description: Jesus as the Good Shepherd in many ways depicts a mother's care for her children. But he does not associate gender with mothering, but caring is a need for all of us; we need to care, and we need to be cared for.

Tags: Mothers, shepherd, Jesus, good, sheep, children, voice, mothering, caring, love, feed, food, hungry, homeless, Ukraine, Ukrainians, war, peace, Bible, Alpha, lunch, feeding, Manhattan, Elizabeth, New Jersey

Psalm 23, John 10:22-30 --

Fun Facts About Sheep

Sheep figure prominently as metaphors in two of today's lectionary readings so maybe it would be helpful to know a few things about them. Here are 10 Fun Facts about sheep from the SPCA, British Columbia, Canada.

1. Sheep [octopuses, goats and toads, cattle, deer, llamas], many animals preyed on by

other animals] have rectangular pupils that allow for a wide field of vision, around 270 to 320 degrees. This means that sheep can see almost everything around them, especially predators, except for what's directly behind them, without having to turn their heads! Yet, sheep have poor forward vision and can see only about 20 feet in front of them.

<https://www.farmanimalreport.com/2020/07/10/why-do-sheep-have-rectangular-pupils-4-videos/>

<https://savvyfarmlife.com/what-sheep-can-see/>

<https://spca.bc.ca/news/fun-facts-about-sheep/>

Sheep can see in color, noticing colors like red, green, yellow, black, brown, and white

if you're a human with good eyesight, you can probably see objects clearly that are 60 feet away

Sheep Can Rotate Their Eyes Upwards

About 50°

Try this: keep your head facing straight but rotate your eyes upward to look at the sky or ceiling. After a while it starts to hurt, doesn't it? Well, sheep have the ability to rotate their eyes 50° upwards and hold it for long periods to time. This comes in handy while grazing; the sheep's head is down but they need to be able to stay focused on what's going on around them.

The sheep will graze with their head down but rotate their eyes upward so they can continue to scan their surroundings. Sheep graze for as long as seven hours a day;

imagine holding your eyes like this for seven hours! Most herbivores that rely mostly on grazing have this same ability.

Sheep Can Rotate Their Ears in Different Directions to Pick Up More Sounds

Sheep can rotate their ears completely 180° to pick up sounds all around them. They can even rotate their ears in different directions from one another, enabling them to stay alert and notice any sounds that may be out of the ordinary. By doing this, sounds reach each ear at different times, amplifying the sounds

and helping the sheep recognize any sound that isn't usual.

Sheep are especially wary of loud random noises. Their first instinct upon hearing such sound would be to run away in the opposite direction that the sound came from. By staying together in a flock and all using their keen sense of hearing, sheep should be able to easily pick up on danger approaching.

Sheep Can Hear Sounds Over 2.5 Miles (4 km) Away

Sheep have such good hearing that they can recognize sounds up to 2.5 miles (4 km) away. This means that sheep can easily track sounds as approaching the flock or traveling away from the flock. Sheep can also recognize sounds; they use this most often when trying to communicate with each other.

Ewes will locate and recognize their lambs by their sounds. Sheep within a flock will also use calls and sounds to signal where each member is.

2. Sheep have an excellent sense of smell and can smell through their noses and their feet! This helps them recognize and communicate with each other.

3. Ewes recognize their lamb's bleat. Ewes are able to recognize which lamb is theirs just by the sound of their calls.

4. Counting sheep? Take your time. There are over 1,000 breeds of sheep!

5. Sheep are clever animals. Research has shown that sheep can recognize up to 50

other sheep faces, and remember them for two years. They are even able to recognize human faces!

6. Sheep can self-medicate, using plants and other substances that otherwise hold no nutritional value to them to prevent or treat disease, and they teach their young to do them same.

7. Sheep are emotionally complex with distinct personalities, capable of experiencing a wide range of emotions, just as humans do. Many studies have

highlighted the ability of sheep to feel afraid, angry, bored, sad, and happy.

8. Sheep are highly social animals and live in flocks not just for protection but because they just like to do so. Studies have shown that sheep are capable of friendships that last for years.

9. Sheep are selective grazers, and prefer to eat vegetation close to the soil surface. The philtrum, grooves in their upper lip, allows them to get close to the ground and only

select the grasses and other vegetation that they like.

10. Sheep do not have top front teeth.

Instead, they have a hard upper palate that the lower teeth press up against to breakdown food.

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From a 2016 sermon at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Pleasantville, New Jersey:

My wife Jan and I are just back from an eight-day visit in Japan with friends who

celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in Tokyo where the wife's mother is living at age 110, yes, 110, and where she was born. Our friend is an Anglican priest in New Zealand where she works with several Japanese Christian families and has been the Canon Preacher of the cathedral. Her great grandfather was a Christian pastor who was one of the first Christians in Japan in the 1870's when Japan was first opened to Christianity. [She, the Rev. Canon Junko Preston, Canon Pastor of the Cathedral in Wellington, New Zealand, has just published her autobiography in New Zealand.]

While we were there in Japan we took a tour of Tokyo where I had worked for a few weeks as a financial analyst about forty years ago, and we were amazed at how modern everything looked now, much more modern than in any American city. On the Tokyo tour our guide said her religion and the religion of most Japanese was Shinto during their lifetimes, and Buddhist at their deaths. Only about one percent of Japan is Christian, if that. The atomic bomb at Nagasaki was detonated directly above the Roman Catholic cathedral, whose building remains can still be seen today.

The Shinto religion distinguishes itself as a worship of one's ancestors; Buddhism on the other hand worships Buddha and the transcendent life he proclaimed. A Buddhist expects eternal life when he or she dies; a Shinto gets caught up in a sort of 'cloud of witnesses' to be adored in the next life. But as I reflected on this 'state religion' of Japan, I realized it was very similar to the common folk religion possessed by many Americans, and probably by many Christians both here and in other countries.

I spent eight months as a chaplain at Ground Zero at the World Trade Site

blessing all the remains, and I have attended all the 9-11 remembrance memorial services as an officially designated chaplain since September of 2001. About eighty percent of more of those reading the names of their deceased relatives every year talk to them as though they can hear them, much the same way a Shintoist would talk to his or her pre-deceased ancestors. The Holy Spirit, or God, is not a part of the commemoration, nor is Jesus, even though most of those praying would likely express their formal religion as being Christianity or Judaism. They likely attend church on Easter and Christmas, or synagogue on Passover and

Yom Kippur, or a mosque in Ramadan, but probably few other times during the year.

On a very practical pragmatic plain they are actually worshipping the remembrance of their predeceased relative—just as does a Shinto.

At our last days of our lives, we frequently comfort ourselves by saying we once again will see our deceased relatives—similarly both for most Christians and Jews. We rarely probably think of Jesus or God as our guiding shepherd, so today's Gospel lesson about the Good Shepherd, though we have heard it every Fourth Sunday of Easter,

and think of the most common representation of Jesus as being the Good Shepherd, when push comes to shove, we really want to rely on the presence of those of our family who have gone before more than we formally rely on the Good Shepherd, as least that is my particular experience. At last, that is what many who call themselves Christian do; we here today are probably a small minority who actually think of Jesus as our Good Shepherd, although we too may have elements of Shintoism as well as Buddhism in our generic belief system.

And I think that many who call themselves Christian really are more Buddhist in leaning as concerns the afterlife, again much like the Japanese; we want to go to a place of bliss and more or less mindlessness when we die; we hear heaven called the Great Wedding Feast, but we think, really, how much can a body-deprived being eat after all? And no one will be married in heaven, so what gives about this wedding feast thing?

Thus, as I reflected on the apparent disparity between many if not the majority

of Japanese and Americans, I see far more similarities than dissimilarities.

We were quite impressed with the Japanese technology—now they have nine Bullet Trains connecting every major island of Japan at speeds exceeding 200 miles per hour; we have one between New York and Washington that works most of the time, but at half or less the speed of the Japanese Bullet Trains. I was particularly impressed that all the cars I saw in Japan were probably less than three years old, without any signs of scratches or dents, quite unlike what we see in New Jersey and New York

and the rest of the US. And the Japanese strange sub-zero interest rates have strengthened the Yen about eighteen percent over the dollar in the past two years.

The women of Japan live an average of over 86 years now, longest of any nation in the world, and two or more years longer than the average American; Japanese men live on average to over eighty, again two or three years longer than American men.

The other thing that struck us was that we did not see a single homeless person on our entire trip; Tokyo's population is more than twice that of New York's and not a day

passes when one is not confronted with beggars and homeless people in US cities. Somehow everyone in Japan seems to have housing even though our unemployment rates are both around five or six percent.

But what about our Christian faith? Why is it not 'effective' in Japan? And I ask the perhaps more pertinent question here in America, why is Christianity on a steep decline both here and in Europe?

I can speculate on two or three reasons:
(1) The Bible is a relative unknown and unread book. (2) We are not really taught that much about our faith after about the

fifth grade—most fifth graders know more about the Bible from their Sunday School than we adults ever learned. (3) Somehow, we do not see our Christian faith as practical in solving real day to day problems.

The one comforting thing we still do do as American Christians is pray—over eighty percent of Christians and American in general will admit to praying even though we do not attend church regularly if at all, but few even pray before any meal except possibly on Thanksgiving. But other than that, we in the US (and UK) are relatively

indistinguishable from non-believers both here in the US and in the world as a whole.

The nineteenth century American preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, said, “The elect are whoever will (follow Jesus), and the non-elect are whosoever won’t.”

Charles Spurgeon, the nineteenth century British preacher said, “Lord, save all the elect, and then elect some more.” And someone saw a bumper sticker in Los Angeles that said, “Honk if you believe anything.”

What distinguishes a Good Shepherd? A good shepherd never gives up on caring for

the sheep. Saint Monica never gave up on her son, Augustine, who was finally baptized at age thirty-two (32) and who went on to become a bishop and one of the premier theologians of all time, St. Augustine. Monica epitomized, exemplified, the care of a good mother for her child, the care of a shepherd for her lamb.

A mother of eight children was once asked if she had any favorites. “Favorites?” she replied. “Yes, I have favorites. I love the one who is sick until he is well again. I

love the one who is in trouble until she is safe again. And I love the one who is farthest away until he comes home.” Jesus said, ‘That is what God is like. God is a Divine Parent whose love never stops, a Parent whose love will never give up. You may stop loving God, but God will never stop loving you.’ You may run away from God, but you will soon find that your legs are too short. You can't get away from God. And that is not a threat, but a promise! God is out on every road where people, like sheep, get themselves lost, earnestly and tenderly seeking them and calling them back home.

[Donald B. Strobe, Collected Sermons,
www.Sermons.com]

God has been seen as a shepherd in some of the earliest writings of the Bible. And the Christian church has looked upon Jesus as the Good Shepherd in its art at least as early as the first catacomb paintings. There is a documented picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd that dates to 250 AD in the tomb of a family in Europe. And many paintings since then depict the shepherd qualities of Jesus. Perhaps this is one of the most loved ways of thinking about our Lord, even

though it does not affect our lives in many practical ways; we do not tell others where to find their Good Shepherd—it is not good to speak about our faith to others, or so we think.

Jesus' detractors were continuously in confrontation with him. This story in today's Gospel of course takes place in the period before the crucifixion. The Judean Temple authorities challenge Jesus to speak a clear indication of his messiahship, and Jesus does that, pointing to his works. Earlier, in the previous Chapter 9 of John's

gospel, Jesus had healed a man born blind, but the religious leaders around Jesus are still in denial about what Jesus' miraculous works indicate. Clearly no one else had ever brought sight to someone congenitally blind. So that mighty miracle could mean only one thing, Jesus was able to act with the power of God. But seeing for the Temple authorities was not believing. They wanted a Messiah that would throw off the chains of the Roman occupation of their land. The time of the year for today's Gospel, the festival of the Dedication of the Jerusalem Temple was the season we call Hanukkah, celebrated near our Christmas in the month

of December, as you know. It was a time the Jewish people remembered their miraculous deliverance from the hands of the despotic Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian ruler who had desecrated the Jerusalem Temple by sacrificing a pig on the sacred altar, thus profaning it, and then putting his image as Zeus as a statue in the Holy of Holies, both horrifyingly unthinkable to the Israelite people. In 164 B.C., the bonds of Antiochus were broken by the brave actions of the Maccabeus brothers who defeated him and returned independence to Israel for over a hundred years. So it was not out of context the

demand that a messiah-like person should do what the Maccabees had done two hundred years before. But of course, Jesus did not come as an earth-conquering hero. Jesus came to rescue the true people of God from everlasting bondage to satan. But Jesus' message was not heard because of the hardness of their hearts that wanted political advantage in this world.

A similar thing happens to us when we are far from God's voice, wandering astray from day to day. Without the care and

guidance of the church we find ourselves lost in a variety of activities.

The good shepherd however does not let go of his followers. Eventually they will come back to the fold. Maybe they will be like Shrek the sheep, unsheared, dirty, disease infested, but the good shepherd will simply remove the old coatings of street life, the cave life for those living in abandoned warehouses and railway tunnels and the like. And Jesus will bring us back to his Father looking pristine and clean for the kingdom promised to us from our baptisms. We are

the sheep of his pasture. Today let us all
hear Jesus' call to come back to his fold.

Alleluia, Christ has risen!

The Lord has risen indeed, Alleluia!

Amen.