

## “Keeping Faith Between the Ditches”

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(1 John 3:16-24 and John 10:11-18)

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd.” But shepherds have no place in our space age world, even though for centuries they lived under and gazed at the intricacies of the galaxies as much as astrologers, those precursors to modern scientists. And in their lonely night vigils, shepherds received communications from beyond the stars. From Abram’s call to “go from your country to the land that I show you,” to shepherds keeping their flocks by night in the Judean hillside, shepherds are historically the conduits for God’s call and good news (Will Durant).

And Jesus reaches back into all that tradition, picks up the image, and says “I am the good shepherd.” He takes the lowly and despised vocation, and in a strange combination becomes both shepherd and sheep. One of the earliest pictures of the crucifixion is a Byzantine wall painting showing the wood-stick cross with a large nailed lamb on the crossbar: Lamb of God! Good shepherd! “Look, if God will hand over an only child as sacrifice, then behind all of creation there’s not a holy terror or a disengaged deity, but love: Love so amazing, so divine, so unutterably intense that it will perform all the roles: shepherd, sheep, whatever it takes to provide for us” (David Buttrick).

The image is true. If honest, we’ll admit that we are all being led or misled somewhere and that many of us are lost in the wasteland of this secular/religious pasture. We struggle through on mixtures of a few Bible verses, superstition, civic religion, old wives tales, neopaganism, New Age theology, pantheism, Gnosticism, or Sunday School literalism. It’s a strange concoction that passes for religious conviction in our society. It would make a voodoo queen wince and a witch check her formulas. As Charles Taylor says, “We lose a sense of where the place of fullness is; we feel we’ve forgotten what it would look like, or cannot believe in it any more.” In quiet desperation we ask, “Is this all there is?” We want to be the type of person for whom life is fully satisfying, but often we are conscious only of a strong sense of dissatisfaction. We decide to love and get married, and then the love withers like a morning glory in the heat of the day. We select a vocation, but when promotions are denied, and the work lacks meaning, we are lost. And God laments, “My sheep are scattered over all the face of the earth.” Sure the image is ancient, but we really are like sheep, and sheep need a shepherd.

So, thank God that in a world where we are lost and running on empty, someone is willing to be our shepherd. Jesus loves us with a fierceness that we can barely comprehend. The good shepherd is not just some image, some prop in a Christmas play; **the good shepherd reveals the very heart of God.** There’s a picture of the good shepherd in action in Luke 15: The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes after the one who is lost until he finds it. Perhaps no one understood this story better than Francis Thompson who was born into a rich Catholic family in Manchester, England, in 1859. He was sent to a boarding school to prepare him for the priesthood. When it was obvious this wasn’t his vocation, he was trained as a physician. After the death of his mother, he became addicted to opium and fell into despair and life on the streets, facing hunger, disease, and drug addiction. Here he was befriended by a prostitute, who took him in, cared for him through the winter, and encouraged him to write poetry. A literary editor published one of his poems and the

prostitute disappeared from his life with these words, “They will not understand our friendship.” There is no other way to explain this than as a miracle of providence and no other word for the ministry of that prostitute but Holy Spirit. Shortly before his death, Thompson penned “The Hound of Heaven.” It begins with “I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years. I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the midst of tears I hid from Him,” and yet the hound of heaven he said, “**pursued me with all deliberate speed.**” The good news here is the relentless pursuit and the passion of the hound of heaven. The hound of heaven and the good shepherd are the same creatures: Each one is God in Christ who searches us out and knows us, who comes to us in any form we can receive him, even in the form of a prostitute, simply because God is the love that will not let us go.

Rowan Williams says, “It should be a rather exhilarating thought that within every circumstance, every object, every person, God’s action is going on. It means that each one of us is already in a relationship with God before we’ve ever thought about it. It means that every object or person we encounter is in a relationship with God before they are in a relationship with us.” Think of it: God shepherding the universe. So, thank God for the good shepherd, who having made us, will use any means to bring us home.

We can trust this picture of God establishing a universe that “depends on God moment by moment, carried along on the current of divine activity. Within and beyond every object, including rocks and trees, there is this intense energy and movement. The scientist, of course, will tell us that at the heart of every apparently solid thing is the dance of the subatomic particles,” and there’s no reason to discredit the findings of science. In fact, the preacher in me is delighted that movement and energy are at the center of scientific explanations, because at the center of the subatomic particles there is an action and motion still more basic, an outpouring of love and grace and trust directing human beings to fullness of life – the outpouring of life from God.

Sadly, the church often disconnects itself from this creative energy and movement. The church has a tendency to fall into depressing bouts concerning who should be allowed seats on the bus, instead of driving the bus toward its destination. Please note that I have updated my original shepherd image to a more modern one, but it is important to get at what happens, not only to individuals who are out-of-control, but also to churches. G. K. Chesterton, in his book *Orthodoxy*, said that Christian teaching is like a vehicle driving very fast down a road, wobbling furiously from side to side yet somehow staying upright – “reeling but erect.” One of my early teenage hobbies was drag racing. We had a stripped-down, souped-up 1957 Chevy with one seat, a roll bar, four large tires, and a frame. Sitting on the frame was a 351 cubic inch 8 cylinder engine with a four barrel carburetor and an overhead cam. It would do 185 mph. When I revved that engine at the starting line, my starter always yelled the same encouragement: “Keep it between the ditches.” Good advice for drag racers and good advice for those of us who are trying to make it from day to day.

We need help staying out of the ditch. Well, Jesus offers to be our shepherd and guide us home. Our I John reading suggests, “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another.” Some Christians are all about beliefs and doctrines and hard positions and they drive the bus into the ditch. Other Christians are about love, and anything goes and they drive the bus into the ditch on the other side of the road. But here is a powerful biblical balance: Belief and Love. I want to suggest an image for Christians who see themselves more as warriors in the culture war than as good shepherds of God’s flock – an image from the world of music: “When you see a

great performer, a singer or instrumentalist at work, realizing a piece of music, you are looking at one human being at the limit of their skill and concentration. All their strength, their freedom, and you could even say their love is focused on bringing to life the work and vision of another person – Bach or Mozart. So what if we decide that being Christian is more like being a great performer and we put all our strength, freedom, and love into performing the faith? If we are fully engaged in the vocation of shepherding the weak, the tired, and the fearful, our love is focused on bringing to life the work and vision of Jesus.

I believe that we are presently at one of those critical junctures in our history where it is imperative for the church to reach back into our tradition and recover her shepherding vocation. There's a word from the Lord in Ezekiel that judges the churches for our misplaced priorities: "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals." While we try to prove the age of the world, parse the Greek verbs in Romans 1, and battle over the Bible in the church, outside in the world, millions of people are scattered like sparrows in a hurricane, like sheep lost on mountains and they are food for all the wild animals. The world lies in wait for a church that doesn't have to be right but has regained her senses and her vocation and found her balance: a balance of warm hearts and engaged minds; a balance of social justice and evangelism; a balance of hospitality and disciplined Christian practices; a balance of scholarship and devotion; a balance of belief and love. Our job is to put ourselves more at the service of God and God's shepherding work in the universe.

With boldness let's do our part to shepherd our portion of God's pasture and declare and show something of God's liberty, God's love, God's ability to make new things and to make relationships. Let us portray to a skeptical world that God is in the habit of sharing life, pouring out love. God continues to make a universe in which God can create more sharers of divine love. Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.