

## **EASTER IV – 2022**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

*Amen.*

My prayer practices change from time to time because I need a little variety to keep me from getting stale. Yet one practice I come back to for long stretches is to begin with the reading from Forward Day by Day and then follow that with Morning Prayer. I used to have to carry the pamphlet, BCP and Bible when I traveled, but a friend showed me that Forward Movement has all of that on its web site, so all I have to have at hand is my iPad. So nice and simple, and they always find the pages for me and give me some choices for the canticles and prayers I want to use. This is a blessing of technology for which I am deeply grateful. Try it sometime!

It is May, so a new person has just taken on the meditations for this quarter, and he is as thoughtful and provocative as were his predecessors. He has been more disclosing than many, and has revealed that he is an adult male, has at least one adult child, is a layperson, and grew up on a farm or ranch where they raised sheep. They did everything one can do with sheep, from the birthing to the butchering and wrapping for sale. Because this is Good Shepherd Sunday, I want to say more about his understanding of sheep, but I want to share one of his daily meditations that particularly moved me.

His adult son was serving in our military in one of our occupation forces some few years ago, and as a native man of that country was offering him the gift of an ice cream cone and handing it to him, a sniper shot the man in the head and killed him. The author shared this because he was writing about the 38<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and he said his son lived in the anguish and agony described in that psalm for a long time after.

I could tell that his faith grew by watching his son heal ever so slowly and come to the place of knowing that God loves him dearly. I very much like how this man looks and listens to the world around him and has learned to see God's hand in it. That is true in his other meditations this week which harken back to his childhood and his relationship with sheep. One day, when talking about all the things that go into their care, including moving them from pasture to pasture, shearing, feeding them from a truck or by hand, bathing newborn lambs in warm water in the sink, he said that no matter how much they knew his voice and his presence, when he needed to get a hand on one of them, he had to force it into a confined area and snatch it with a crook. He writes: "It seems to me that we sometimes behave that way with our Shepherd, happy to oblige when we're getting our needs met but scampering out of arm's reach when it's time for a course correction. Thanks be to God," he adds, "who with mercy and grace, carries and loves us—even when we need a shepherd's crook."

I like this man. I look forward to a good three months with this man as our morning shepherd.

There is something about the Collect of the Day that speaks volumes. After we remind ourselves that God's "Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people," we pray this: "when we hear his voice [may we] know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads."

I hope you hear that this is a dangerous prayer for us to use, for it lays our lives on the line, promising to be a follower of Jesus.

Just think of the many ways we are asked to be followers every day: all the commercials which want us to follow them to the store or the computer to order this latest product that is going to make our lives so much better than they are now. Some of them cut down on the amount of work we have to do to care for our homes, our yards, our

cars. Some of them allow us to pay an amount of money regularly so we won't ever have catastrophic bills at a particular time. Some of them offer us a medicine to ease our pain, aid our digestion or evacuation, help us lose weight, regulate our heartbeat—all of them promising us to live longer and with less pain or embarrassment. Some of those commercials offer us a product to make us so beautiful or handsome that we will be irresistible to that someone out there whom we have been waiting for all our lives. Some of them offer us more intelligence, better memory, better sleep, or even more calmness to help us get to sleep.

There are still more ways that we are asked to be followers: the political groups that want us to vote a certain way, want to corral our minds and help us to think more broadly or more narrowly about who belongs in our society. There are those who think that most of us should have our rights curtailed and only a rare few should have the power and authority to shape what we can and cannot do with our bodies, with our minds, with our loving.

And of course, in whatever way one group wishes to lead us—and by whatever means, even by hook or by crook—there is another group that wants to lead us in the opposite direction.

There are so many shepherds out there. How do we know which ones to trust? Which ones are truly “good?”

The point that scripture makes, from the psalmists on to the prophets to Jesus to Paul and the other apostles, is this: WE ARE SHEEP. That's not a very flattering description of us human beings. Pigs are smarter than sheep. Horses are more elegant. I suppose we could name a lot of other animals who are better than sheep in one way or another, so that we might feel more complimented to be compared to them. To my mind, as you might guess, dogs are more everything than sheep.

I guess the piece of music that has influenced me the most in thinking about sheep is Handel's famous chorus: "All we like sheep have gone astray." Does that mean we are too dumb to follow? Or are we too obstinate and stubborn? Or are we too arrogant? Or simply too self-absorbed? Take your pick. None of them reveals any significant degree of virtue on our part.

And yet, and yet... The author of Psalm 8 opens up some other possibilities for us to consider as to how God really thinks about us. He ponders a question which later intrigued Shakespeare. First, the psalmist sets the stage: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses," .... So powerful an image, isn't it? And then he asks this question: "What is a human that you should be mindful of him? The child of a human that you should seek her out?"

The psalmist is caught up in wonder, and he answers his own question: "You have made a human but little lower than the angels; you adorn her with glory and honor; You give her mastery over the works of your hands; you put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, even the wild beasts of the field...." That's what God really thinks of us, how God treasures us in God's heart of hearts.

The author of the Book of Revelation goes even further with this theme. His image is of God on the throne, with the Lamb, robed in white at God's side. Think of that: In God's eyes, Jesus, too, is a sheep, even more, Jesus is a vulnerable lamb. Jesus has become like us, one of us, and it is as a vulnerable Lamb, put to death on the cross, that Jesus has saved us from death and even from ourselves. The Lamb has become the shepherd leading us to life and drying our tears.

This is mystical language, my friends, not the language of essays and treatises. This is the language of dreams and visions that are more true than visible reality. This is the good news which is true, the essence of all creation!

A blessed Easter season to you! *Amen.*

*+JJJ*