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“Who Needs a Shepherd?”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

April 21, 2013

Ezekiel 34:11–16; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9–17; John 10:11–16, 22–30

How often, O Lord, have we come here to hear a Word from you? Sometimes our coming is casual. Sometimes we are distracted, thinking about the things we have to do, the places we have to go, the people we have to meet. But you have our attention because we come seeking a word from you, a Word that speaks into the abyss of our lives, into the chaos and clamor of the world around us. Come speak to us, O God, while we are waiting, yielded and still. Amen.

You may have noticed that as I move toward the exit in my ministry with you as your pastor, I have become somewhat more revealing about the challenges of preaching to a congregation. It’s not because you’re a challenging congregation, but it is a challenge to preach to any congregation. One of the first challenges is a sermon title. You have to come up with a sermon title early in the week so it can make it in the newsletter. The title has to have some relationship to what you are going to say on Sunday. It also has to be inviting so someone may want to come to church and hear what you’re going to say on Sunday.

This past week, I was out of town in Atlanta for a meeting of the Columbia Theological Seminary Board. Much to the happiness of the church staff, I sent my sermon title in on Sunday night. I had read the texts. I knew what the Bible lessons were going to be from the Lectionary, so I came up with this title: “Who Needs a Shepherd?” It is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, which is always “Good Shepherd

Sunday.” I sent the title on to Valerie, and I thought I would do some “shepherd talk.” How do we relate to sheep and shepherds in urban America, in downtown Durham? You don’t see many sheep wandering around on Main Street or Parrish Street or Roxboro Street. They would obviously get run over. That was where I thought I was going on Sunday night when I sent in a sermon title.

And then Monday came. BAM! Bombs exploded at the finish line at the Boston Marathon. There were pictures of bloody people. There were three dead and over a hundred were injured. A city and a nation were grieving, afraid. *Who needs a shepherd?*

BAM! BAM! A huge factory explodes in West, Texas. Numbers of people were killed, including firefighters and public safety officials. *Who needs a shepherd?*

BAM! BAM! BAM! The Senate of the United States rejects a proposition to extend background checks on weapons, something favored by 90% of the American people, but opposed by the gun lobby. This was something very near and dear to the parents who lost children at Columbine and Newtown. Our president, addressing the nation on Friday night, after the second of the Boston marathon bombing suspects was apprehended, said to the American people, “This has been a tough week.”

All of a sudden, the sermon title that, on Sunday night that seemed a little vague, a little ho-hum at the time, “we’ve all been there and heard that,” had new meaning for me. I hope it does for you.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. (Psalm 23:1, 4-6)

Who needs a shepherd?

The image of shepherd and sheep is very central to the narrative that we tell ourselves, that we tell each other, that we study here in the church and that we teach to our children. David, after all, was a shepherd boy when he began his career. Who is not familiar with those words from that region: “There were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night when an angel of the Lord appeared to them.” Think of all the bathrobed shepherds who have taken center stage at Christmas pageants.

Shepherds have a huge role to play in the narrative that we tell about the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. We read about them, they are in our liturgy, we sing about them, and in a moment, we will sing what many think is probably the most favorite hymn of members of First Presbyterian Church in Durham, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need.” Jesus chose that title for himself. He said, “I am the Good Shepherd,” in contrast to the imposters who do not care about the sheep.

There is a problem. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, representing the Lord who is our shepherd, then who are we? We are the sheep, the wooly ones. Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest who I’ve often quoted, writes, “Most of us think of sheep as slobbering, untidy, dumb animals who exist only to be shaved or slaughtered.” So maybe the question should not be who needs a shepherd but who wants to be a sheep?

I’ll never forget one of my most cherished memories of being a pastor in this congregation. It took place on Good Shepherd Sunday. I had been preaching on these texts about sheep and shepherds, and we were also having a baptism, so I gathered the children around the baptismal font and was trying to stay in the spirit of the text and the sermon. I said to them, “Friends, do you realize that this morning, we are going to baptize another little sheep into our congregation?” Emma Robinson, who is now a grown woman who at the time was one of the children, looked up at me and said, “You’re gonna do WHAT?!? You’re gonna baptize A SHEEP?!?” I was never able to get the congregation back for the whole rest of that service.

Let me set the record straight about sheep. I have it on good authority that sheep are not dumb. I got it from someone who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. In fact, the suggestion that sheep are dumb is a prejudice, an ugly rumor perpetrated by cattle farmers. They say sheep are dumb because sheep are different. And you know that old story: if it's different from me and mine and ours, then it must be bad and dumb and no good. We are plagued by that kind of prejudice down through the present moment.

Let me tell you what the difference is. Cows are herded from the rear by cowboys cracking whips. In other words, they get behind them to get them moving. This will not work with sheep. If you try standing behind sheep making loud noises, they will go crazy trying to get behind you.

They prefer to be led. You push cows, but you lead sheep. Sheep will not go anywhere if someone does not go first. They need a shepherd who will go ahead of them to show them that things are all right and that they'll be safe and cared for.

Jesus said: "I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me."

There is a bond that exists between the sheep and the shepherd. The relationship grows and the shepherd and sheep develop a way of communicating that outsiders are not privy to. A good shepherd learns to sense and hear a bleat of one of the sheep in his flock. I'm told that in Palestine over 2,000 years ago, shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various parts of the pastures would often mix and mingle the sheep. Various flocks would be at the watering hole after dusk, so the sheep got all mixed up. Eight or nine small flocks turned into a convention of thirty or forty sheep around one watering hole. But their shepherds never worried about the mix-up. When it was time to go home, each one of them issues his or her own distinctive call: a special whistle, or a particular tune or a reed pipe. And the sheep would follow.

It is comforting, isn't it, to hear a familiar voice? An old friend called me this week. I hadn't talked to him for years. He was calling to check up on me as I was

preparing for my retirement. I said hello, and I recognized his voice. He said, “I’d recognize your voice anywhere.” “I’d recognize yours,” I replied.

I remembered as a kid, growing up in Live Oak, Florida, which is a small town of about 5,000 people, I would wander around, playing football in the front yard with my friends. When it was about time for supper, 6 or 6:30, wherever I was, my mother would come outside, and she had this distinctive whistle. She would start whistling. Bette Conroy has a good, distinctive whistle like that. I knew my mother’s whistle. I also knew it was time to put down the ball, whether it was a football or a baseball or a basketball, and head home because there was somebody waiting for me. There was supper on the table.

A shepherd seeks the welfare of the flock and seeks to lead the flock in God’s ways towards God’s good future. I have received some very touching letters and notes and emails from people who have been in this congregation. This week, Lanny Pratt wrote me that he would not be able to be here in two weeks, but he wanted to express gratitude for our relationship. His note was entitled, “My Good Shepherd.” He went on to discuss how he and I bonded and my interaction with his dear mother, Ella Fountain Pratt. Others of you have used the image of shepherd to describe our relationship. Let me tell you, I am honored, and it has indeed been one of the highest privileges of my life to be one of your shepherds. A shepherd, as I said earlier, seeks the welfare of the flock, and I can assure you that you are in the hands of Good Shepherds, even as I leave you, and other Good Shepherds will come by God’s grace.

Let me be bold enough to suggest that this is a good time for you to be shepherds to each other. Right after I leave, Homer Ashby, Susan Dunlap, and David Verner will begin a course to help all congregation members who are interested and willing to learn more about what it means to exercise the shepherding function in the life and ministry of this congregation. It is a great opportunity for you to grow as a congregation and to be good shepherds.

Who needs a shepherd? You do! I do! We all do!

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leads us into the future. It is uncertain. We know bad things happen. This week is full of evidence of that. But over and over again, the witness of Scripture, the texts that we have listened to Sunday after Sunday together, the Word of the Lord for us has been, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). It is the word of the Good Shepherd for God’s flock for you, God’s people.

A couple came to me to talk about their impending wedding service. Part of the conversation is usually about what text to use in the service. I usually suggest a number of texts. I have some favorites but I try not to push them too hard. After listening to me, they looked at me, and one of them said, “We’ve decided what Bible passage we want to be read at our wedding.” I asked, “Which one?” I thought they would choose one of the ones I had graciously suggested. They said, “We thank you for your suggestions, but we want you to read the twenty-third Psalm, and we’d like for you to preach a homily on the twenty-third Psalm.” I said, “I’ll be glad to do that, but that text is usually reserved for funerals or memorial services. Why do you want the twenty-third Psalm at your wedding?” They said, “Joe, we grew up in families, we know the struggle of being in families. We are aware of what’s going on in our society. We are a little anxious about getting married. We know it’s not going to be easy to make our life together, to work together, to make the sacrifices, commitments. But we are committed to each other, and we want it to happen, but we also want to know that the Lord is our shepherd who will go with us in good days and tough days.”

This has been a tough week. There may be other tough weeks. But listen to the Good News as we continue our journey with God, the journey God has in store for you and for me. We go forward with the assurance that we are not traveling alone. I have a sneaking suspicion that you need a good shepherd. And so do I. And the good news is, we have one. We have one who has our back and who is leading us forward, for wherever we may wander, wherever we may roam, the Lord whose eye is on the sparrow is watching over you. Amen.