

Easter 4 2022 Good Shepherd Sunday

Psalm 23/John 10:22-30

Pastor Ann Hultquist

Sheep rustling...probably makes you think of the Wild West, doesn't it?: Cowboys surrounding a herd of cattle or a flock of sheep and driving them off into the sunset. Little might we imagine that sheep rustling is going on today in a country where you'd least expect it: England

The rolling hills of the English Lake district, home to the stories of Peter Rabbit and endless acres of misty farms, seems like the last place on earth for a crime wave, but it's true—thieves are stealing the puffy white gold of the British countryside.

Andrew Allen, a shepherd there, says "They want our sheep." He was surveying his flock, now thinned after a recent theft of 45 sheep. The reason? Meat prices, especially now—those 45 stolen sheep were worth \$7,500—twice what they would have sold for a few years ago

There's a thriving black market for lamb, with the meat sold illegally to small grocery stores and pubs and penny-pinching consumers. Most police think that organized crime is involved in the thefts.

In the Lake District, farmers love their sheep-- local gift shops celebrate them with stuffed toys, mugs and cards. Mr. Allen said he was devastated when he noticed his flock had shrunk. "I noticed one day that there were a bunch of them missing." How, a reporter asked, could he tell, considering he owns a flock of 600 sheep?

"Because," he said, "a shepherd knows."

Ask someone, even non-church folks, to tell you a verse from the Bible, and odds are good that it will be "The Lord is my shepherd." Many people have the picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd imprinted on their mind from Sunday School days or from a stained glass window in a church sanctuary.

But the fact is, you and I have pretty much *nothing* to do with sheep, do we? We live in the city, we live in the suburbs—there are no green pastures nearby--unless it's a golf course! Why is it, then, that this picture of sheep and shepherd, why does this psalm speak so deeply to us, thousands of years after it was written in the Bible?

I wonder if some of that doesn't come directly from what Jesus says today. Jesus uses almost this entire chapter of John to describe what is meant when he says "I am the the Good Shepherd." In this morning's passage Jesus says "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me."

In Jesus' time and still in some places, several shepherds grazed their sheep together in the same pasture, or in the same hills. They could take turns watching the combined flock, and there was a camaraderie in being together—being a shepherd was not an easy life: lived with the sheep in the hills out in the open, slept with them, they protected them from predators and thieves.

Other people didn't think too much of shepherds—considered to be rough and crude and untrustworthy...but they did have one talent: when it was time to separate the sheep into individual flocks again, each shepherd called their own sheep—they recognized the voice, and they followed their shepherd.

There are so many voices in our culture, on social media, in our world--they yell, they whisper half-truths, they speak words that are hurtful and violent. The anguish of the people of Ukraine, the violence that is tearing so many lives apart is spurred on by lies and the awful dichotomy of *us* vs. *them*--a division that we know all too well in our country, too.

I don't know about you, but there are all sorts of voices that call out to me every day:

The voices that tell us to be afraid--because things are changing and there are some *other* people who want to take away what we have and who want our country to own up to its failures. Be afraid.

There is that critical voice we have inside, too—the one that is quick to point out your mistakes and shortcomings, and remind you of your failures. You are no one, nobody.

And everywhere we turn, voices tell us that if we buy this car, these clothes, this phone, this beer, this lawn fertilizer, life will be oh! so good.... “You want it...you need it!” they say.

Who listens to all that?...Well, you and I do, no matter what age we are--you and I, we listen--to that very loud and pervasive voice: *If you do this, if you achieve this, if you have this, if you let no one get in your way, then and only then will you really be **somebody**.*

If we buy into all of it, it’s exhausting...and you find that the voice that is calling, what you are chasing, is always just one step ahead— with more pressure to get, to hang onto, to be, and to do. If we listen to those voices, there is never any rest, or still waters, and plenty of fear to go around.

But there is another voice, the Gospel says. A voice that calls us by name— Beginning in the waters of baptism when we are named as God’s child, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of the Good Shepherd, who showed the depth of God’s love in the cross and empty tomb.

Jesus’ mercy and forgiveness does not say “*if you*” but “you are mine; I know you; I love you.” We wander, we get lost, sometimes we follow someone or something else for a while...

But there is always that voice of the Good Shepherd, inviting us to return and to follow. And inviting us to live out the love we’ve been given in the ways we choose to live and the ways we use our own voices.

The compassion and strength we need to do that comes from the One who gathers *all* people into one flock, calling each of us by name. **A shepherd knows**