

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away-- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

There is so much we could talk about in this passage. You know that we in the Episcopal Church, and in many other denominations, follow the same rotation of proscribed readings called the “lectionary.” Following the same lectionary means that Christians all over the world are pondering the same readings, and the same Gospel text, on the same day - and I love that. Kind of like feeling the presence of the Communion of Saints, I feel the communion of faithful listeners, and the communion of other preachers wrestling with the same text. There’s always something different that shines out to be preached, no matter how many times you look at the scripture, but in our passage today, I was just awed to identify six separate sermons wanting to be preached. What an abundance of good news! And how perfect for us right now – in the midst of recession and bankruptcies, layoffs and illness - when we could all use a little reassurance, and a dose of good news.

What shines out to me today is the strong sense of action, of strength and protection, that we find in Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Not Jesus the meek and mild, Jesus the sacrificial victim; not Jesus the gentle tender of a docile flock of little lambs. No; this is Jesus the leader; this is Jesus the great protector. There is nothing dreamy or peaceful about the five times he says in this passage, *“I lay down my life.”* He is no passive victim, shocked by his own crucifixion. He is not some sacrificial pawn caught in a terrible transaction between a vengeful God and humanity. No; Jesus is nothing less than the Lord of Creation, Christus Victor, who has the power to lay down his life of his own accord, and to take it up again, for the sake of the human race. He names himself the Good Shepherd, and names us as his sheep.

You know, sheep get a really bad rap. They are called dumb, and docile; witless creatures who haven’t a brain in their heads. But I have spent a little time with sheep – living in the mountains of West Virginia, where the springtime sings with the little bleats of newborn lambs all over the countryside, when it’s all hands on deck to help with the lambing and the care of the herds. And what I know of sheep is that they are willful, and strong; they have their own ideas about where they want to go, and what they want to do. They require not only the constant presence of a shepherd, but the intense energy of herding dogs to keep them in check. Knowing this about sheep, I kind of like that Jesus thinks of us as his flock, because I know that I myself can certainly be a little unpredictable; a little bit of a wild thing.

But I also know how willful and self-involved I can be – no wonder he thinks of us as sheep. I have to say I’m really glad he didn’t call us his flock of turkeys: now that would really be an

insult. If you've ever seen a flock of turkeys outside in the rain, you know that without their keepers to get them under shelter, the turkeys will raise their open mouths to the sky and drown. Now I've done some dumb things in my life, but I'm not quite as hopeless as a turkey. A sheep: yes. And not always a fluffy one, needing his tender embrace: more like the gnarly difficult one, all muddy and matted, angry and isolated and stuck in the thorns - needing more than anything his strength, his strong love, his firm shepherding. Jesus knows this about me, about all of us, and loves us just the same: he said, "I know my own, and my own know me." Jesus is our guard and our guide; and it is his passion to search us out, and to make his presence known to us, wherever we've stranded ourselves.

There's a fascinating thing that I learned about the ancient practice of shepherding. In Jesus' time, a sheepfold was an enclosure just as you'd imagine, but without a gate or door at the opening. To gather the sheep and safeguard them, the shepherd would first move them through the opening, gathering them into a place to rest in green pasture. Then, instead of a gate to close, the shepherd actually laid down at the opening, and this was where he slept. He would wake at the slightest touch or sound of an intruder. The shepherd *was* the gate. You may remember Jesus saying, just a paragraph earlier in John's Gospel, "*I am the gate.*" I am the *θηροπο* /*thoora*, in Greek meaning the *doorway*. Through the laying down of his life, through what Jesus did, the doorway was opened for all to be gathered into the one flock, protected and guided by the one Shepherd. Jesus said, "*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*" This to me is also incredibly good news: that all humankind, all God's children, are equally beloved and welcomed into the fold, through the love of Jesus' bold action of laying down his life for us all.

Our celebration today marks a milestone in the lives of our young people and their families. Almost every major religion has a rite of passage to mark the transition from childhood into young adulthood, and the Rite 13 Celebration is ours. You, our remarkable young people, hold the future in your hands, and we lift you up in prayer and love as you step forward into it - with each other for support, and with your families and communities behind you. Jesus reminds us all today of the dangers out there in the world - wolves, and hirelings - those who have only their self interest at heart. Jesus reminds us all today of the truth of who our Good Shepherd is. You are his, and he is yours. You can count on him to be by your side through everything. You can talk to him about anything - Jesus loves the sound of your voice.

Know that you are loved, and forgiven, and celebrated by the God who made you - by the God who longs to see you develop into the fullest *you* that you can possibly be: after all, there will only ever be one "you" in all of creation, for all time. Be who you are, and shine! Strong, and unique: not fooled by those who would deceive you, but clear, and confident, and counter-cultural. Yes - it is definitely countercultural to be a Christian in the world. To be a Christian means standing up for truth, and love; it means having a voice for equality, and justice; it means being a champion for God's creation, and for the brave work of waging peace. Being a Christian means using all of our unique gifts to lessen the divisions that we as humankind try generation by generation to put behind us. Being a Christian means doing the world-work that moves us closer towards the Kingdom of God.

Now, I know this all must sound like a very tall order. It is. It's the work of all Christians, promised in our Baptismal vows. But we have everything we need to step forward. Having Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we have his guidance and his guardianship. Having intelligence, and insight, and intuition, we can make good choices, and trust ourselves to do the best we can. And when we are afraid and lost, or caught in the briars of life, we are not alone. Call out for Jesus, and you will find he really is right there to help. *"I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me."*

Amen to that.

The Rev. Julia A. Fritts
Associate Rector, St. John's, Stamford
May 1, 2009