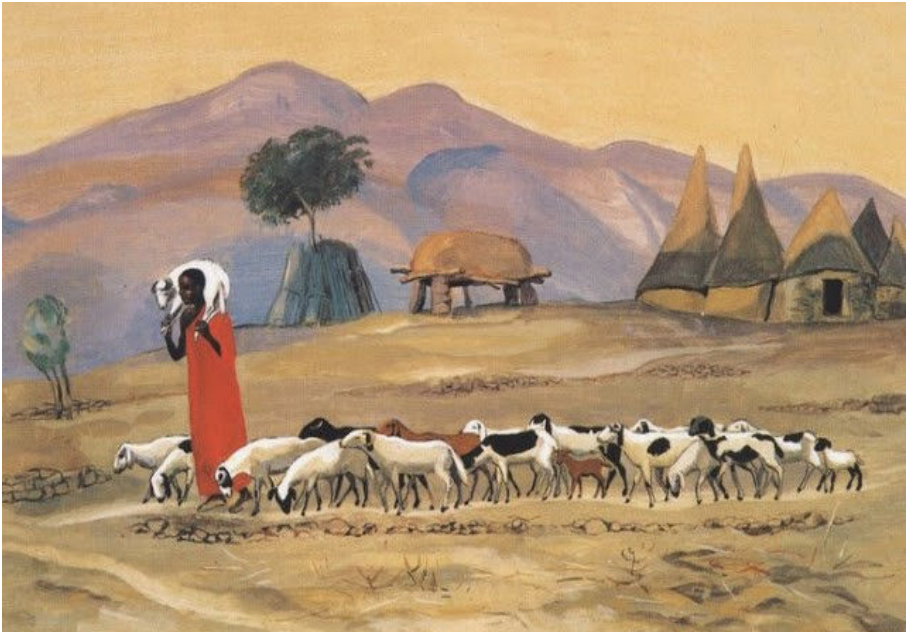


April 30, 2023

The Fourth Sunday in Easter

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

“The Lord is my shepherd.”



Can you think of a time in your life when you really wanted a shepherd? I don't mean a literal shepherd showing up on your doorstep some Saturday morning, but instead someone to care for you, to comfort you, to reassure you? Maybe you didn't think of it precisely as wanting a "shepherd" per se, but nevertheless a time in your life when you needed soothing, heart-level comfort amidst deep pain, or someone to speak a word of reassurance that everything would work out in the end, that ultimately all would be okay? Maybe a time when a loved one or you yourself were very sick, or a period of stress and uncertainty amidst the loss of a relationship or a job? A time perhaps when your world suddenly felt much less familiar, maybe much less secure, and in that vulnerability you wanted someone strong to come alongside you with soothing comfort, someone trustworthy to come near who would reassure you that everything would be okay.

As some of you know, I recently defended my dissertation and will be graduating next month with a degree in New Testament and Early Christianity. My career as a doctoral student is gliding rather smoothly to a very upbeat, positive conclusion. But it has not always been so easygoing, and in fact, the first couple years were very, very rocky. Originally I was not admitted into a New Testament program but rather into a track called Buddhist Studies. This was several years ago, at a very different time in my life, well before the thought of becoming an Episcopal priest was anywhere on my radar, and actually well before Shoko and I had even joined the Episcopal Church. I was about a year into my Buddhist Studies Ph.D., and to put it succinctly, it was not going well. My adviser and I didn't really click, the job prospects post-graduation were looking somewhere between undesirable and non-existent, the depth of my student debt was growing deeper than a bottomless mug of coffee at IHOP, and for the life of me I simply could not bear the thought of having to translate one more ancient Sanskrit text. I had totally hit the wall. So much so, that I began noticing that I would wake up in the mornings either halfway through reciting the Lord's Prayer, or mid-sentence in Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." I had so much churning anxiety within me about my unpleasant situation as a Buddhist Studies Ph.D. student and my very uncertain future, that just the idea of starting the day caused my sleeping, unconscious mind to begin desperately trying to soothe and reassure itself by reciting Scripture even before I woke up.

But the point is that things did not stay in that sorry state.

Now, several years later, I can see with hindsight how even in those dark, difficult, anxiety-ridden days, there was a divine flow moving me along, setting up interests and relationships and opportunities whose interconnections were not apparent at the time, but which eventually (over a period of years) came together for my good, in a way far better than I could ever have asked or imagined. To take just one example briefly, I would likely not be an Episcopal priest today if it hadn't been for those difficult years in Buddhist Studies. Though I didn't realize it at the time, those Buddhist years served as a crucial bridge for me between the evangelicalism of my childhood and my present priestly vocation, and without that bridge, I may well not be standing here today. The Lord was being my shepherd at that time, leading me slowly but surely through a parched wilderness, a valley of the shadow of death, towards life-giving pastures and waters whose destination I could not perceive then, but which in time have, rather unexpectedly, appeared.

How about for you? Where in your life, or perhaps in the life of someone you love, could you or your loved one use a Shepherd? A good Shepherd, a divine Shepherd, like our loving Lord Jesus who comes alongside us when we are weak, vulnerable, afraid, anxious; our good Shepherd who speaks a soft word of comfort and reassurance; our loving Shepherd who works behind the scenes of our lives for an ultimate good that we humans can appreciate usually only years later with perspective and hindsight. Maybe you or someone you love faces a serious illness, the loss of a job, a fraught relationship, anxiety over the state of our climate, our politics, our world... I invite you to turn this morning to our good and loving Shepherd Jesus, who in the words of Psalm 23, is our Shepherd this very day. It's not that Jesus was our Shepherd 2,000 years ago, or will be our Shepherd in the distant future: yes, those things are true, Jesus has been and will be our Shepherd. But it's particularly significant that Psalm 23 stresses the present-day quality of this relationship: Jesus is my Shepherd, Jesus is your Shepherd right now, today, this morning—a Shepherd to care for you and comfort you amidst whatever is happening in your life this very day; a Shepherd who knows whatever wildernesses or valleys you currently find yourself in, whatever concerns or fears or anxieties presently threaten the well-being of your life; a Shepherd, importantly, who knows the way out of those valleys, who knows the paths through the mountains down to the plains of green pastures and sparkling waters; a Shepherd faithful to

accompany you, to walk alongside you, even to give his life for you, so that, in the end, your life might be made well.

The Lord is our Shepherd today. So we can take a breath, pause, relax, stop for at least a moment the spinning wheel of activity and anxiety. The Lord cares for you and for me; all will be okay. As St. Julian of Norwich famously said, “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” This is not trite, pie-in-the-sky, escapist theology, and this is not denying or minimizing the real fears and pains and dangers that we truly face. This is not claiming that Christ will wave some magic wand and suddenly all illness, loss, death, gun violence, climate destruction—fill in the blank—goes away. Or that these sufferings don’t hurt or don’t cause real distress. Not at all. Sometimes, perhaps often, the path through the mountains leads through the valley of the shadow of death. But in those dark valleys—valleys which are truly dark and scary, and which we all must pass through in various ways sooner or later—in those dark valleys, the Lord is our Shepherd. Christ remains with us, walking with us, showing us the way forward, running a little ways ahead to prepare the path for us, always then coming back to speak a word of comfort, hope, and reassurance—reminding us that he is and always will be our Good Shepherd, both in this life and the next.

So wherever we find ourselves this morning, whether on a mountain crest or in the deepest valley of our lives, I invite us to turn to the one who walks beside us the whole journey long, our Good Shepherd Jesus, the one who is our Shepherd this day. What a difference it makes to know that we are not walking the journey alone. There’s someone beside you with a firm but gentle hand, a strong but calmly reassuring voice. Turn to that Good Shepherd this morning, share with him your concerns for today’s journey, invite him to guide you, and then wait to hear his word of comfort, encouragement, and love.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.