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4 Easter, Year A
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Hearing the Call of the Shepherd

John 10:1-10

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Acts 2:42-47

Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Good Shepherd Sunday never disappoints with its drumbeat of images of shepherds and sheep. It is the warm blanket and comfortable sweater of liturgical days. Its purpose is to help us imagine both who and how God works in our lives. Sheep needs shepherds and shepherds need sheep.

In the animal world, it has always fascinated me how many species have evolved to adapt, survive and multiply by working together. They stay close to one another for shelter from prey, geese fly in formation to draft off one another to make flight easier, and some animals will build a common nest or burrow.

You may remember the March of the Penguin movie from 2005, narrated by the voice of God himself Morgan Freeman, about the annual journey of emperor penguins near the South Pole. Penguins are communal animals and even the males take on a role before the young ones are hatched. They take turns laying on the eggs. Some males even roll the almost ready to hatch egg back and forth with another male to keep it warm in their very harsh cold climate. Remarkable. Cooperation. Community. We could learn much.

We could learn a great deal from animals.

So important is the group to animal survival, that our language has given unique names to many of them. Names that have always amused me. A colony of ants. A swarm of bees. Buffalo and turkeys come in gangs. A herd of cattle. A murder of crows. A pack of dogs and wolves. A pod of dolphins and whales. A school of fish. Flamingos: a stand. Geese: a gaggle. Giraffes: a tower. Gorillas: a band. Kangaroos: a troop. Lions: a pride. Locust: a plague or cloud. Otters: a family. Oxen: a team. Penguins: a colony.

How about you and me – ordinary people – what would be the name of our grouping?

The faith answer is pretty clear on Good Shepherd Sunday theme. As followers of Christ, we are like pigeons and sheep in that when we live, gather and work together we are a flock. This flock may not always move in sync or as one. We may disagree on which way to go but we learn through experiences that collaboration and cooperation is a far better way to go. The African proverb that never gets old: IF YOU WANT TO GO FAST GO ALONE: IF YOU WANT TO GO FAR, GO TOGETHER.

The early believers in Christ's resurrection seem to get this. We read about their cooperation in the first chapters of Acts. To you and me, the scene can come across almost too good to be true.

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A golden moment perhaps. A glimpse of what some might call a Christian utopia. Before the institution of the church took hold, empires were built and blessed, the violence of the Crusades and the religious battles when anyone who disagreed with the prevailing majority position was excommunicated or worse – followers of Christ simply lived and worked together. They made provision for those who needed help.

What gave the early Christians courage and vision to take the risk to do what they did?

This is where the durable image of the shepherd comes in.

What is the biggest impediment or obstacle for a person to share what they have with another? My guess: fear.

What could cause someone to throw caution to the wind and pool resources – to not lay individual claim on anything they might own? My guess: the lack of fear.

Sheep and other animals know that danger looms at any moment. To rest is to risk one's life. To actually lay down one make feel safe.

I watch out our back window at home at deer as they come out of the woods and graze our neighbor's field. The other evening a very large deer was laying down, and she watched her offspring graze near her. It was a pastoral scene if there ever was one. For a moment content and safe.

The Shepherd song, the 23rd, begins: The Lord is my shepherd. And this shepherd "makes me lie down in green pastures."

Fear is as real today as it ever was. We all, at different times, get unsettled and feel anxious. It is the understatement of our age and the observation of many a sermon.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.

When we pray it enough, with God's help, we might even believe it to be true.

Our daily work is to find ways to listen to the one the who calls us each by name. To create space for God to show up. To tune out the noise and chatter. To lean in to hear the One who knows where we've been and where we're going. Our comings and going in and out the gate.

We hear about the gatekeeper in today's gospel. John: "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

Usually, the second most powerful person in an office setting is the person who in effect serves as a "gate keeper" for the boss or president. This is the person who screens the calls, shifts through the emails, and makes the decision about what things rise to the top needing attention. The reason the Chief of Staff at the White House is such an important job is because they are one who decides access and importance. A parish administrative assistant, and we've been blessed with excellent ones, can be a gate keeper for all the right reasons.

The gospel does not suggest or hint that Christ is the gatekeeper, deciding who gets and who is rejected and left out into the cold.

God is much more than the famed St. Peter of all the Pearly Gate jokes – with a clipboard in hand checking credentials.

The imagery suggests that Christ as the Shepherd is the one invited into the lives of the flock.

There is much about the images of the Lord as our shepherd that can give us comfort through difficult times.

Our work this week. What gate, or door, or opening beckons for us to walk through?
Easter is all about newness – life and spirit. May we find peace and assurance that we are
forever known and loved.