



May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sheep. What is the first thing you think about when you think of sheep? Soft? Woolly? A cute little lamb? Mint Sauce? A few years ago we rented a cottage in Wales for our holidays. Next to the cottage was a field in which there were sheep. It was near the river, and the grass was tall everywhere else except inside the sheep pen, and on a little perimeter just outside of it. Like a neatly mowed lawn, the grass was clipped in the never-ending quest to munch.

It seemed to me that those sheep had a good life in that little pasture. It all seemed very perfect—except when it rained. And if you have visited Wales, you know that is something that happens there a lot. So you can imagine that these hardy sheep in a pasture in Wales would be used to the rain. But when I looked in the pasture, those sopping wet sheep with their wool hanging down from their bellies they didn't appear too happy. It seemed to me that perhaps these sheep were in need of a good shepherd. Every day I would look at the sheep. They seemed to be always eating, and were often soggy. It was a very wet holiday!

These memories were refreshed when a couple of years ago we saw all those images of communities flooded out, with whole swathes of land under water. One of the images was of about a dozen sheep huddled together, stranded on the top of a small hill with the water encircling them still rising. Then entering the scene was a young farmer, not in a four wheel drive vehicle or his tractor, but in a boat. And inside the boat with him was a sopping wet sheep, soon to be joined by more off the top of the hill. The television crew interviewed the young farmer called Jerry. Although it seemed strange to see a farmer in a boat, it should have been of no surprise, for here he was collecting stranded animals and taking them back to safer pasture.

The crew followed him back to where he was depositing the rescued animals showing a scene that looked like it came out of Noah's ark. Sheep, goats, cattle, ponies all from different farms gathered as a newly formed flock, huddling together for warmth. And in the midst of them stood Jerry, beaming with a huge smile, with his wide-brimmed cap, a bright orange poncho and waders, I realized Jerry stood before me and all those watching as a truly good shepherd...one who cared enough to literally gather the lost lambs, and cattle and goats and ponies etc., but even more importantly, to gather them all into one flock.

Our Gospel reading this morning speaks of the Good Shepherd, and though we might not imagine the Good Shepherd of this Gospel wearing an orange poncho and waders, we quickly realise that Jerry, and our Lord, Jesus, are quite alike.

Jesus says plainly to us, "I am the good shepherd." And straight away he explains that he is not like the hired hand that leaves his sheep to the wolves. Rather, he is the one who loves his sheep as his own children. Who cares for them, feeds them,

and protects them. Who promises them he will not leave them alone. And most remarkably, will give his own life for them.

We need to know this Good Shepherd. We need to know this morning that this Good Shepherd will not leave us, even when we stray, even when we feel the rains of this life are bogging us down, we will never be abandoned. For this shepherd has literally given his life for you and me on a cross just outside the city gates of Jerusalem.

It would be sufficient to stop here with our Gospel text this morning, to know that you are in God's care. But there is more to this Good Shepherd—this **God** Shepherd. For not only does God desire us in this sanctuary to know this Good Shepherd, but for everyone outside of these walls, outside of this pasture, to know him as well.

In our Gospel, Jesus is not just content to gather the sheep of his own flock, of the Jewish people—God's chosen people. Jesus declares to his disciples and to us that he has come for "other sheep," other people. And that if you look closely at the gospel text, it is after he has gathered what he calls the "other sheep" that he then describes that he will die for them all. For truly in the care of the God Shepherd, we are one flock, one people of faith. Fences, walls, boundaries mean nothing to this God Shepherd, and we here this morning are a product of that great and unbounded love.

Now, we probably don't think of ourselves as "those other sheep," but we are. And like every generation of "other sheep," we soon forget the miraculous gift of being brought into God's one flock. So here we are in Amersham, Buckinghamshire and the question begs to be asked: What fences, walls, boundaries have we put up as a community and individually that without our realising it are keeping others from entering this sanctuary?

What can we do to break these down and how are we to move forwards in gathering in the kingdom?

These are the sorts of reflections the PCC explored on our Zoom PCC Day reflecting on our Mission Action Plan. As we continue to explore these questions together in the coming months as we grow into living the mission of Jesus within the new pandemic norm, we need to look at the fences within and without our congregations, as we look to gather other sheep around the word and presence of the Good Shepherd.

Our journey of faith together is a wondrous thing, be it filled with both sunny and rainy days. But regardless, on this journey we are promised the company of the Good Shepherd, the shepherd who is our God, who like Jerry in his orange poncho, beams at us with great affection and love, and calls us one flock.

Amen.

Acknowledgments;

The Good Shepherd, Fences, and Other Sheep
Pastor Bob April 29, 2012