

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
 John 10:11-18 *All We Like Sheep*

Worship Service on March 29, 2019  
 The Rev. Dr. Robin L. Carden

## LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

### CALL TO WORSHIP-Psalm 95

O come, let us sing to the LORD;  
 let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!  
 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
 let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!  
 For the LORD is a great God,  
 and a great King above all gods.  
 In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
 the heights of the mountains are his also.  
 The sea is his, for he made it,  
 and the dry land, which his hands have formed.  
 O come, let us worship and bow down,  
 let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!  
 For he is our God,  
 and we are the people of his pasture,  
 and the sheep of his hand.

## CHILDREN'S TIME

### OPENING PRAYER

Good Shepherd,  
 Teach us to follow you  
 to care for all that are close to us,  
 to protect those who are threatened,  
 to welcome those who are rejected,  
 to forgive those who are burdened by guilt,  
 to heal those who are broken and sick,  
 to share with those who have little or nothing,  
 to take the time to really know one another  
 and love as you have loved us.

Good Shepherd,  
 Teach us to follow you  
 to spread compassion to those who are far away,  
 to speak for those who are voiceless,  
 to defend those who are oppressed and abused,  
 to work for justice for those who are exploited,  
 to make peace for those who suffer violence,  
 to take the time to recognise our connectedness,  
 and to love as you have loved us.

Good Shepherd,  
 Teach us to follow you  
 and to be faithful to calling you gave us

to be shepherds in your name.

#### SUNG RESPONSE

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,  
Consider all the works thy hands have made.  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder.  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.  
Then sings my soul, my savior God to thee,  
How great thou art, how great thou art.  
Then sings my soul, my savior God to thee,  
How great thou art, how great thou art.*

#### SCRIPTURE John 10:11-18 & SERMON

*“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.”*

The window of my room in a bed and breakfast in the town of Conway in Northern Wales looked out onto a sheep pasture. Actually, it more than looked out on a sheep pasture, it was adjacent to the sheep pasture as in, I could stick my hand out the window of my room and pet the sheep. When the owner of the home came to ask if I needed anything, I asked her why the sheep had swaths of different combinations of colors on one of their hips. Honestly, it looked like they’d had a game of paintball or something—to the novice eye, it appeared that they’d all “gotten into something” or rubbed up against wet paint. The hostess explained that the color and combinations of colors of the swaths was intentional, an indication of which farmer owned which sheep in the shared pasture land beside her home.

Her words reminded me of Jesus’ statement in John’s gospel, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” (Jn. 10:14) Those swaths of color were a Welsh shepherd’s way of knowing his or her sheep.

Images of sheep and shepherds fill the pages of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Many of the greatest figures of the Old Testament started out, or spent part of their lives, as shepherds. From Abel, the son of Adam and Eve who was slain by his brother, to Abraham, to Moses the first time he fled Egypt, and even King David, shepherds played significant roles in the story of the people of God. In addition, in the Bible there are myriad images of God as a shepherd, and God’s people as sheep, especially in the Psalms. And then of course there is the important role shepherds play in the birth of Christ—the angels came to tell them—not to the powerful emperors of the land or the leaders of “Corporate Israel”—but the angels came to the lowly shepherds to share the news of the newborn king.

Unlike people in the Bible, most of us don’t have much first-hand experience with shepherding. (Unless you have a corgi or some other kind of herding dog. A lot of herding dogs will try to shepherd every living thing in a house into one space if they can.) But, most of us aren’t well-acquainted with the ways of a shepherd. While we

might see a few sheep scattered here and there in a hobby farm, ranching is not a way of life in the places where most of us live. But again, that wasn't true for the people hearing these stories and Psalms when they were first told. Those original audiences would have been well-acquainted with the ways of a good shepherd and they would have known that the life of the sheep depended on the goodness of the shepherd.

In Handel's *Messiah*, there is a chorus called "All We Like Sheep." This title from the famous oratorio is taken from the sixth verse of the fifty-third chapter of the book of Isaiah, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." This verse is a recognition of humanity's tendency, when left to our own devices, to go astray, to turn away from God. That is why the relationship between sheep and shepherd was a common metaphor in scripture. People would have known that sheep tended to wander away from the flock and they would have likely recognized their own tendency to do the same and wander away from God.

They also would have known that a good shepherd, regardless of how far a field a sheep had fled, a good shepherd would seek that sheep out and return it to the safety of the sheep pen, return it to the place where it is protected from wolves, bears, and other predators.

Because see, here's the thing about sheep. Unlike most other animals, sheep need shepherds to protect them because sheep have few, if any, natural defenses.

Though there is a story about a sheep, perhaps you've heard this story it's been making the rounds on Facebook lately, but no worries, I did some additional research and found multiple accounts and photos, and even Snoopied it and for all accounts and purposes, it is true. A true story in which the sheep does develop some natural defenses, a true story that does not necessarily need to be told in terms of preserving the integrity of this sermon but rather because I think it's a great story and really, who doesn't have time for a great story these days.

It is the story of a sheep named Shrek who was on the lam (I'm sorry, I just couldn't not say that) a sheep that was on the lam in Australia for six years. That's right, somehow it got away from its shepherd and by the time it was found, nearly sixty pounds of wool were sheared from its body—that's enough wool to make twenty men's suits. Or, because one pound of wool can yield a mile of yarn, that sheep was carrying around 60 miles worth of yarn. Ranchers figure that the only thing that saved that sheep from the dingos was its overgrown coat that became so thick it couldn't be penetrated by a predator's teeth. I suppose we could think of it as a form of social distancing, at least in the animal world—just use your wool to create enough space between you and that which is a potential threat and you will likely be okay.

But, people don't have sheep for the sake of letting their wool grow to such lengths. That defeats the whole purpose of raising sheep in the first place. Rather, sheep are shorn for their wool on a regular basis and this leaves them basically defenseless in the face of prey.

That is why sheep need good shepherds, while most other animals have natural defenses to protect them—sharp teeth, claws, strong jaws, talons, horns, something . . . sheep depend on their shepherd for protection. Perhaps that is why the Bible offers us so many stories and metaphors about shepherds and their sheep. One of my favorites is the story of David when he was a shepherd boy. As we learn from this story, as a shepherd, David regularly put himself at risk in order to protect the sheep in their care. As David says to King Saul when he's explaining why he doesn't want to use Saul's armor and sword to fight Goliath and would rather just use his own slingshot instead, David says, "[I have] been keeping [my] father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear . . ." Obviously, as a good shepherd, David was committed to protecting the creatures entrusted to his care. And, when he sees the opportunity to protect the people of Israel from the predator Goliath, he doesn't hesitate to do the same.

Nor does the Lord, as the good shepherd of Israel, hesitate to protect the vulnerable people in his care. Take, for example, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that expresses the role of a good shepherd beautifully. “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”

Of this Psalm Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann, because I needs me a little Walter Brueggemann these days let me tell you, of this Psalm Walter Brueggeman writes “[The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm] recounts in detail by means of rich metaphors, a life lived in trustful receptivity of God’s gifts . . . [the author] is full of gratitude, yielding, trust, and thanksgiving” and knows . . . “that in every case, life is fully for and resolved by [a God] who responds to and anticipates every need.”<sup>1</sup>

Because that’s what a good shepherd does, a good shepherd responds to and anticipates every need. And friends, that surely is what we need . . . a good shepherd. And friends, that is surely what we have, our Good Shepherd Jesus Christ who knows us, who knows us by our names. A shepherd who is trustworthy and good. A shepherd willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for his sheep. A shepherd who is walking with us through the valley of the shadow of death, even now. A shepherd who is trying to guide us towards still waters to take a break from all of this . . . a break, a breath, a Sabbath rest. A good shepherd. We’ve got such a good shepherd.

And though we don’t know what the future holds, we know that this good shepherd will abide with us, responding to and anticipating our every need. Thanks be to God.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

#### OFFERING INVITATION

#### BENEDICTION

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;  
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann. *The Message of the Psalms – A Theological Commentary*, excerpts from pages. 154 -155 as found in on the website of Trinity Episcopal Church – Bay City, MI in a sermon from Sunday, May 11, 2014.