

Easter 4B
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
April 25, 2021

Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
I John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

Grace to you and peace from our risen Lord, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I didn't know this before, but I have learned that the world is divided into two distinct camps. There are "dog" people and there are "cat" people. Earl and I were always "dog" people – we had Sheba, a mix with a strain of Australian Dingo in her. Sheba who died of cancer almost twenty years ago. She loved Earl because he rescued her and brought her to a new home where she was loved and cared for and got snacks that took her to utopia. And then there was Molly, a black lab mix, also rescued from the SPCA – a lover and runner and eager participant in all that was happening. And then there was Sam – Sam who moved in with me with me when I was in seminary – and suffice it to say that Sam defied explanation. I can regale you with stories – perhaps another time.

But it was six years ago that a sweet cat decided she would move in with me. She let me know that her name was Sadie. The whole circumstance of that move too is another story for another time. Yes, Sadie was at home. Now, I'm not sure if you have experienced the differences between cats and dogs and their respective behaviors at home. I have learned a lot. I've learned to hang toilet paper the "wrong" way so that Sadie doesn't unspool it all with her pawing when I am away. I've learned to not worry if she doesn't emerge for a few hours from whatever hiding place she feels secure in. I've learned that cats are not decisive – when she sits at the back door and meows as if she has not eaten for days and her food bowl is full and I open the door and she sits and looks at me and looks out the door and looks into the kitchen and then looks at me and then looks outside and then gingerly takes a step out across the threshold. Not looking back until moments later she decides that she needs to be inside. I've come to understand the joke about trying to shepherd cats. A task that leaves me holding the door wondering if she wants to go out the door or in the door or out the door later or simply wants to watch me holding the door.

Shepherding. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday in the Church. It is the 4th Sunday of Easter and our Gospel reading is always from the tenth chapter of John where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd and the Psalm is always Psalm 23.

In all of this, we're pretty much called a bunch of sheep. Now a lot of us don't like being compared to sheep. After all, we think of sheep as stupid – though they really are not. They don't seem to have much individuality or initiative – though the shepherd knows each one of them. And, they always follow each other all the time. Herd mentality.

But, we're modern, sophisticated people of the world. We think for ourselves. We decide what's best for us. We don't follow a herd. Right? Or do we.

The idea that people tend to follow the crowd isn't foreign to us. We can just look at the way fashions change to see that it's true. One day, a movie star wears a particular brand of sunglasses. And the next day, everybody has to have the same kind. Or one day, some senator shouts out an insult during a session of congress. And the next day everybody is shouting insults the same way. There was a time when you would never hear bad words on television. But now it seems to be the "in" thing to do.

We may not like to admit it, but we behave a lot like sheep. Culture tends to form us and shape us. We feel pressure to keep up with the flock, to play follow-the-leader in politics and society. We are social creatures, who really are happier when we stay within the bounds of our social norms. And we do not always consider whether those norms are what we should be following.

Sometimes society challenges us with the question, “Are you a leader or a follower?” This is not the question to be asked. You see, we are all followers. The better question is, “Who or what do we follow?” How do we find our bearings in our lives? On what is our belief system based? What is the yardstick by which we know when our lives are on track, or when we’re about to follow the herd off the cliff?

There are a lot of voices calling to us these days, aren’t there. There are a lot of voices raised that further the divide between us. There are voices that scream hate and vitriol, division and exclusion. And we hear them All. The. Day. Long.

Step back. Turn it off. Just say no. Return to the flock where the shepherd leads us.

I’ve recently read this: I’m not a Christian because I want the reward of heaven. I’m not a Christian because I’m running from hell. I am a Christian because the character of Jesus Christ is so compelling to me that I want to spend my life chasing it, embodying it, and sharing it.

The character of Jesus. The person of Jesus. Jesus, the Shepherd. The one who lived and taught and touched and loved and healed and ate and drank. The one who the needy and sick and infirm followed. The one who the leaders and influencers and movers and shakers of that time despised and crucified because what he taught was just too much for them to handle. Jesus was not on the side of the powerful. He challenged the authorities. His mark on the world was that of love. And that mark changed everything.

So my friends, what does this mean to us? What does it speak to us as we are in a world of vitriol, of two camps, of angry speech, of harsh hearts. Please step back. Stay close to the shepherd. Don’t follow the herd to the end of the cliff. It is with the shepherd that we find cool water, a place of rest, nourishment even in the face of the nay-sayers, the enemy.

It is with the shepherd that we know goodness and mercy. Our reading of the Psalm traditionally reads: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. But my friends, a more accurate translation is this: Surely goodness and mercy shall chase after me all the days of my life.

Even in the times that are dark and difficult. Even in the times that are fraught with challenge. Even in the times where the following of the herd rather than the leading of the shepherd is much more enticing – even in those times, the goodness and mercy of God chases after us. To bring us back into the flock. To keep us close to the flock and to each other. As the shepherd leads us.

May it be so. Amen.