



Sermon by the Right Reverend John Stephens
Easter 4 Year C May 8, 2022
Mother's Day/Good Shepherd Sunday

Readings: Acts 9: 36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7: 9-17; John 10: 22-30

Happy Mother's Day to all mothers and to all celebrating this day one way or another. A day to give thanks for our parents and all parental figures in our lives who have shaped us and helped to form us. To honour the gift of love in our families and our relationships.

It is good to be with you here at St. Alban's. The last two years of living in a pandemic have been trying for all of us to be sure and parishes are no exception as we have been working so hard to keep up with the latest health orders. It has been complicated and stressful and thank you for all your work in keeping this parish community connected to each other and to God's presence. I am grateful to your rector, Greg for his work in the parish and also as a Regional Dean and as the chair of Diocesan PWRDF unit. He is a talented and capable priest and I am thankful for his ministry. I am also grateful for the ministry of Monte. I am grateful for the support and teaching that all of you offer him as he prepares to be ordained as a priest. It is good to be with you.

This day, apart from being Mother's Day, in the Church's Calendar, is often known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Maybe this is obvious as most of the Bible readings describe shepherds one way or another. A shepherd is often used as shorthand to describe God or to describe Jesus, sometimes also extended out to refer to clergy and their pastoral role. I sat with that image for a little while this week.

I have known quite a few shepherds in my life. My brother and his wife are both shepherds as are many of my relations and other friends. I like hanging out with shepherds I have discovered, they have a grounded-ness to the earth and the giver of life. I also got thinking about one particular shepherd this week. He was a member of my first parish where I was placed soon after I was ordained. He had a great flock and we often joked about comparing his job with mine. Sometimes we have this romantic image of a shepherd standing in a glistening green field with lambs skittering about and nothing but sunshine and blue sky. This particular shepherd was not afraid to remind me that the role of a shepherd was dirty and hard work. It was not romantic but worrying, not just blue skies but many a storm. The flock relied on you, needed you, hard decisions had to be made, you needed to be a constant presence. I was thinking about that shepherd this week. For when I left the parish, he presented me with his own shepherd crook. The one he used to catch a sheep and steer it toward the right path when it had gone astray. He told me about how he had gone out to the barn to fetch the shepherd crook and he had to clean it off for it was not a pretty sight at first, the muck and mire of life had stained it. That shepherd's crook continues to be in my office to remind me that no matter what happens, no matter how ugly and difficult life gets, no matter the tragedy, struggle, grief, or even celebration and joy... the shepherd, THE shepherd continues to be present and to guide. That image has stayed with me for my entire ministry. And I see it in the Bible readings assigned for this day.

The first two sentences of the gospel were these: "At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon."

On first glance perhaps those words seem rather straightforward with little to get excited about, but let's unpack them a bit as I think they are more significant than simply an introduction to this passage. Especially in the gospel of John, it is no accident that these words are found here. This gospel in particular was carefully planned out, with great intention.

The Festival of the Dedication was an eight day winter celebration of Judaism. Today we call it Hanukkah or the Festival of Lights. It is a celebration of the time of rededication of the temple in Jerusalem after it had been brutally taken over and violated. The rededication involved lighting the Menorah, a symbol of the presence and light of God. Only one small jar of oil was available, enough for one day but miraculously the lamp stayed alight for eight days, hence the season of Hanukkah.

Let's go back to the gospel reading. It was winter and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. Now I want you to try to picture this: huge columns surrounding the temple, formed the portico. The sun is low in the winter sky and the shadows are long. As he walked down this corridor Jesus moved from shadow to light, from patches of light to patches of dark, from black to white. Like the keyboard of a piano or the markings of a crosswalk or a chess board or the words of a newspaper, white to black, black to white. Try to picture that in your mind as Jesus moved between dark and light, light and dark, shadow to sunshine, shade to brightness. I think it is significant.

You see so often we seem to work hard to divide the world into light and dark, in and out, welcome or unwelcome, friend or stranger, sinner or redeemed, God with or God against, hated or loved, and the list goes on and on. Jesus however did not come to ensure these boundaries were held and kept tightly. He seemed much more bent on blurring these carefully crafted lines. He seemed much more intent on pointing out there is much grey in our neatly divided world of black and white. We are missing the significance of God's love, God's embrace, God's words of beloved, God's forgiveness, God's hope if we only want the world divided nice and neatly into those who are in and those who are out. The resurrection of Jesus revealed many things to us but one absolutely is that the grace of God is much bigger, broader and expansive than we ever imagined. In Jesus, it is clear that a whole other view of God moving in this world is seen and known. A vision where there is as much room for grey as there is the two extremes. Much room for blurred lines where a prodigal child is welcomed home, where all is forgiven, where a woman at a well is seen and known and invited in. The portico as Jesus walked down it was no longer to be only patches of black and white but as he walked the edges and the divisions became a lot more blurred. This was the kind of shepherd he was.

The passage that we heard from Revelation for this morning phrased it this way: the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Jesus was inviting any and all to drink of the springs of life, to discover anew God's love and the gift of life, spiritual and physical.

Psalms 23, as we sang earlier phrased it this way: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. God walks with all people, offering waters that nurture the soul. God will not ever let us walk alone.

And in the gospel Jesus said: My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life. I give them eternal life. Some see these words as meaning the gift of the life to come beyond the world we see around us. But I think this is a narrow view of something that was much more expansive. Eternal life is just as much about this world as the next. Eternal life is about coming to know the shepherd, the giver of water for our deepest thirst, the one who calls us by name to seek those things that truly feed our soul and not those that offer a poor substitute.

When we look around at the world of today many of us long to know more about this shepherd, the one whose voice we recognize in our innermost being, the one seated at the centre, the shepherd guiding to green pastures and still waters. For the world feels to be a very troubled place, sometimes overwhelmingly so. We are still living in a pandemic. The wars in Ukraine and other places like Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Yemen continue to horrify us. There is enormous concern about famine and food insecurity gripping too many parts of our world. There is a climate emergency that is often disregarded. There is a need for greater action related to reconciliation with the first peoples of this land and a path forward from the abuses of residential schools. There are so many things that catch our attention when we turn on the news or read an article. We need to hear the voice of the

shepherd whispering to us to break free from a thinking that some are in and some are out, to break free from thinking that a few are chosen while many others are left out, to break free from thinking that only we can determine the wisdom of God. All are beloved of God. We need to trust in a shepherd who will not ever let us go, who will not let us be abandoned, who will love us and all people unconditionally for now and for always... and who calls us to live into that.

Many years ago a shepherd who had a farm just a little ways away from my first parish church, gave me a staff, a shepherd's crook that he cleaned off from the barn. In and amongst all the dirt and mire of this world he took out this shepherd's crook and cleaned it off and presented it as a sign of ministry. More than that for me it was a sign of how we understand God's presence in our lives. Not as one aloof and unconnected to what takes place in our lives and in this world. Not as one who sent the Son, Jesus, into this world to create more divisions of the loved and the unloved, the in and the out. Not as one who has no link to our living and our hoping and our praying. But rather as one who can be found during all of the dirt and misery and pain in this world. Right in the midst of it revealing a sign of resurrection, new life, new grace, new hope. That indeed we are never alone, never forgotten, never unloved but rather guided to a new way to walk in this world; in green pastures and still waters for us and for all people. On this Mother's Day may we live into this invited by the good shepherd.