

EASTER 4 C SERMON for May 8, 2022 Grace Lutheran Church
TEXT: John 10: 22-30 (The Good Shepherd) by Rev. Jim Hill
TITLE: "Our Motherly Shepherd"

There's an old Sunday school song that goes: "I Just Wanna Be a Sheep, baa baa baa baa, I Just Wanna Be a Sheep, baa baa baa baa. . ." When I first heard that, I thought to myself, "Oh please, nobody wants to be a dumb sheep, blindly following."

But I did some research and found out that sheep aren't as stupid as they look. Sheep are not as smart as dogs, but they can recognize and remember one another for as long as two years. Also, sheep have been given a bad rap because they're extremely group-oriented and very easy to frighten. Dr. Keith Kendrick of the Babraham Institute in Cambridge said: (quote) "Any animal, including humans, doesn't tend to show signs of intelligent behaviour once they are scared."

Also, people often think that herding sheep is easy, but even for border collies, it takes a lot of skill. I've heard that there are still shepherds in the Middle East who herd sheep the old way, on foot and with a crook (a long stick with a hook at the end), and the only other tool they have is their voice!

A Scottish professor, George Adam Smith, wrote about this kind of shepherding after a trip to Israel. He wrote: "Sometimes we enjoyed our noonday rest beside one of those Judean wells to which three or four shepherds come down with their flocks. The flocks mixed with each other, and we wondered how each shepherd would get his own again. But after the watering and the playing were over, the shepherds, one by one, went up different sides of the valley, and each called out his peculiar call; and the sheep of each drew out of the crowd to their own shepherd..." (*Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, pp. 210-11)

This helps us understand Jesus' statement in today's Gospel Reading: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." Or "No one will snatch them out of my "herd".

A pastor friend who visited Israel told me that this old-style

shepherding is more like mothering than bossing. He said that shepherds sometimes even name their sheep. In 2nd Samuel 12, the prophet Nathan tells a story about a family who raised a sheep in their house, and pampered it as if it were another child, the way some dogs are pampered nowadays (like at our house!).

The 23rd Psalm that we read a few minutes ago is so well-loved because the poet is describing so beautifully the love and kindness and care God has for us, These are attributes we traditionally ascribe to a good mother. So, even though we traditionally refer to God as our father, we could just as rightly describe God as our mother.

God has many attributes, some motherly and some fatherly. In some places in the Hebrew Bible, God is described as a nurturer and a feeder, as well as a protector and leader.

And the metaphor of God as “father” was carried over from the Old into the New Testament, and into the history of the Christian church. Early church theologians described God as a Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet the metaphor of God as “mother” is a good one too, because that is the character of God revealed especially in Jesus the Christ.

In many stories and descriptions of God in the Hebrew Bible, God comes across as distant and unapproachable, as a powerful warrior or an angry judge or a strict disciplinarian. But, in Christ, God showed Godself mainly as kind and compassionate and tender-hearted, which we tend to associate more with females than males. I think it’s right to say that, in Christ, God was loving us and embracing humanity in a motherly way, “as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings” (to quote Jesus in Luke 13).

I’m sure you’ve seen, in nature shows on television, how mothers in the animal kingdom will do anything to protect their young, even die for them. I read about a forest fire in Western Canada some years ago, that burned a farmhouse and yard, including the outbuildings. After the embers had cooled, the farmer was walking around checking the ruins, and noticed a burnt lump on the ground. Prodding it with a stick, he

realized it was a hen that had burned to death. He flipped it over and underneath were three, live baby chicks, chirping and frightened. In Christ, God was like that mother hen, giving his life for his children.

Thus Jesus said, earlier in chapter 10 of this Gospel of John: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Such self-sacrifice reveals what God our mother is really like.

So my point today is simple: We, as sheep, should follow our Good Shepherd. It’s the smart thing to do.

People often make the mistake of following a government leader or a community leader who lacks the kind of honesty and integrity and kindness and compassion that Jesus exhibited. All some people seem to want is a politician who is tough on crime, cleans up the neighbourhood, improves their standard of living, and generally leaves them alone.

But good leaders are aware that they also need to be kind and forgiving and soft-hearted when that’s what people need. St. Paul said, “Let us bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Leaders who are worth following are the ones who believe in Christian values, and who walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

This is described beautifully in Michael Coren’s latest book, “The Rebel Christ”. It’s in the Public Library, but I bought my own copy, because it’s such a good book. The Rebel Christ – I highly recommend it!

Sometimes pastors and church leaders also fail to follow the Good Shepherd. Church leaders should be like the Hebrew prophets, who pointed away from themselves to Yahweh as the Good Shepherd, and said, “Follow him.”

A good New Testament example of such a prophet is John the Baptist, who gained a tremendous following; but after he met Jesus, he said, “From now on, follow him, not me.” And remember how John said: “He must increase, and I must decrease.” Now that’s a good sheep talking!

Society and government and the church all need good leaders! We need leaders who can fire up and motivate people, but we also need leaders who are sensitive and empathetic and warm-hearted, people who

are willing to listen and to encourage with gentleness and understanding.

And we must not expect our leaders to be perfect. We don't expect our own children to be perfect! Why should we expect it of our leaders?

On this Mother's Day, let us remember that parents are leaders too, leaders of a household, at least for a limited time. And the work of a good parent is to give her children "roots and wings": roots to know where home is, and wings to fly off and practice what has been taught them. Jesus was like a good mother in that he gave his disciples roots and wings. He encouraged them to "fly the nest" and carry on after his resurrection and ascension. Like children with a good mother, the early disciples learned from their Good Shepherd to have courage, to take risks, to learn from mistakes and to grow. It's nurturing love that does that. Motherly love. And it carries us forward when our mother is gone, as it carried the disciples forward when Jesus was gone.

But again, mothers aren't perfect, fathers aren't perfect; nobody's perfect except our divine Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who was totally selfless and totally loving. But as the Scriptures say, we can be thankful, because "We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand."

We must try to do as Jesus said: love our enemies and pray for those who mistreat us. Jesus made a point of being kind not only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but also to the hated Samaritans and other foreigners. Jesus kept company with ostracized and sinful people. He invited the lost, the least and the lowest into his kingdom.

So let us also be gentle and motherly, as Jesus was.

Amen.