

Easter 4 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

As many of you know, I did not grow up around here. I spent all of my life up until I was 23 in Idaho. And most of that time was spent in the Nampa/Caldwell area, two towns outside of Boise that had a LOT of farmland. Over the years, as the population of the area grew, more and more farmers sold their land to developers, which meant farms and ranches became subdivisions. So you might be driving through fields and pastures, then suddenly come upon a brand new neighborhood. The first plot of land we lived on was completely surrounded by farmland when I was born, but by the time I was in middle school, we were completely surrounded by subdivisions, which was unfortunate because the farmer across the street used to let us get free potatoes. Seriously, it was great. But anyway, when I was in highschool, we moved further out into the country...but instead of getting surrounded by farms-turned subdivisions, we moved into one—A lovely new subdivision that was surrounded by a lot of farmland and close to many of the orchards we liked to visit on the weekend. Our new place was great, but living out in the country again posed some problems. The first is that there wasn't a local friendly potato farmer willing to give us free potatoes. We were also pretty far away from any good places to shop or to eat. And another problem we came across is probably something that would seem VERY strange to most of the people in this church---we would occasionally be late to school when a local sheep farmer had to use the only road outside of our subdivision to relocate his sheep. I remember the first time it happened sitting in the car wondering why in the world this shepherd would be using a main road to move his flock, only to realize that that road was likely the only path the sheep could follow. After all, subdivisions like the one we were living in were springing up everywhere, so there was less land to travel over anymore.

Even though I've had some experience with sheep in my life, including my family raising two of our own (which may be a story for another sermon), my knowledge of sheep and shepherds is limited, and I'm guessing those of you who were never waylaid by a traveling flock know even less about sheep than I do. But during biblical times, the image of sheep and shepherd would have been a familiar one. A shepherd was a common profession in Jesus' area of the world in Jesus' time. And a shepherd's responsibilities would have been common knowledge. A shepherd in the first century would have been in charge of caring for his flock. The shepherd would lead the flock out of their pens to graze in the surrounding lands, ensuring they had enough to eat. If the sheep encountered any danger, the shepherd would be expected to help the sheep out of it, or to fight off any predators that threatened the well-being of the sheep. A sheep fold really embodied this. It's basically a protective fence for sheep with only one entrance and one exit and that is where the shepherd would stand to guard the sheep—literally standing in the face of danger to protect the flock from thieves and wolves. And even though we often think of sheep as dumb animals, they are actually fairly intelligent, and would bond with the shepherd who cared for them, and the shepherd would be able to command the flock by his voice. Though sheep are often seen as dumb in our country, they are actually smart enough to recognize the voice of their shepherd, and would refuse to follow any command that did not come from the voice that they knew so well.

So in many ways, Jesus being called the Good Shepherd makes a lot of sense. Jesus cares for us. He leads us to good pastures. Our relationship with Christ helps protect our spiritual well-being. And we are expected to follow God's commands and to know God's will for us, so that we are not led astray by others. But Christ our shepherd also goes above and beyond. Most shepherds during biblical times became shepherds to make a living. They became shepherds so that they would get paid for their services by whoever owned the sheep, or because they owned the sheep themselves, and hoped to earn a profit by raising them up and selling them. But the Good Shepherd does not become a shepherd for his own benefit. He does it to care for the sheep. Christ is not the Good Shepherd because the sheep to

pay the bills, but because he loves the sheep. And it is because of this love that Christ, the Good Shepherd, lays his life down for the sheep.

And this love extends beyond caring for us and leading us and helping guard us spiritually. Some of us may have surprised when we read Psalm 23 today. Because Psalm 23 is often read during funerals. It may seem out of place to read it during a normal Sunday service. But it makes sense that we read it on the Sunday that we hear of Christ as the Good Shepherd in the gospel. This is not just because it also talks about God being our shepherd. It is because the Psalm explains just how far that relationship of loving care extends. It is a reminder that our Lord is our shepherd at all times and in all places, not just in this life, but also the next. Because we are reminded in the psalm that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. We are assured that even after this life, our relationship with Christ, our Good Shepherd, will continue.

We are the sheep and Christ is our shepherd, and that means that the shepherd cares for us, but it also guides how we should respond to that care. We are told the sheep hear Christ's voice, so we should strive to learn what Christ is calling us to do in the world, through reading scripture, through praying, and through discussions with others whom we know to be faithful, so that we are able to hear Christ's voice clearly. And if we know Christ's voice that means we are also able to distinguish it from other voices, which may be telling us things that are contrary to Christ's teachings. And just as the sheep follow the Good Shepherd, so we, too, must follow Christ. We must seek to not only know and understand his commandments, but also to carry them out—to find the best ways to love God and to love our neighbor, and then do those things. We must avoid the temptation to let other things in our lives lead us, like the desire for wealth, or fear that others will look at us strangely if we model our lives according to our faith. But we are never expected to do these things alone. Because our shepherd is always with us to guide us. And we have each other to look towards when we feel like we may be going astray. Let us help each other to come to a greater understanding of what our Good Shepherd is calling us to do in this world, both as individuals and as a church community, let us seek to strengthen our relationship with Christ so that we may better hear his voice and follow his commands, and let us remember that, just as a sheep belongs to a of a flock, so we too belong to this faith family, and to Christ, our Lord, our shepherd. Amen.