

4 Easter C May 12, 2019
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Image of the Good Shepherd
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

It has been called the oldest representation of Jesus in Christian art; an image that has been found in ancient catacombs of Rome dating back to a time when Christian imagery could not be public nor explicit. It is an image that was in some ways similar to a pagan one, and therefore might have been useful in welcoming Gentiles as followers of Jesus. Today it remains one of if not the most familiar symbolic representation of Christ, and it is the image of what we celebrate today: Jesus the Good Shepherd.

Perhaps one of reasons the image of the Good Shepherd has been part of Christianity since its earliest days, is it was one of the images Jesus used quite often to refer to himself. If we were to read more of John's Gospel than we heard this morning, we would have seen that Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd a lot, and went into detailed examples of what the Good Shepherd does: the Good Shepherd knows his sheep by name, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, the Good Shepherd protects his sheep from predators, and is distinctly different from other shepherds that just don't care as much as the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd's flock is not exclusive, according to John's Gospel, and welcomes anyone who listens to his voice. And in today's Gospel we heard that there is nothing in this world that can keep the sheep from the Good Shepherd, no one and nothing can take them away. Because the Good Shepherd is one with God.

Perhaps the reason why Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd more than he referred to himself as a healer, or wise teacher, or savior, or Messiah was because it was the image he most wanted his followers to see and understand when it came to answering the question of who he was.

That question was often asked of Jesus. We heard it asked in today's Gospel, with perhaps a tone of exasperation at Jesus for using images to describe himself instead of just saying it plain and simple. But Jesus responded to both the question and the exasperation by going right back into the Good Shepherd imagery, it seems to be his go-to answer. Maybe it was his favorite way of describing himself no matter how anyone reacted to it. Because the image of the Good Shepherd is even older than the New Testament, it goes all the way back to the beginning and to God, who seems quite fond of it too.

The image of the Good Shepherd can be found in several places in the Old Testament. It is found in the lovey words of Psalm 23, we just chanted and is one of

the more familiar psalms, even to those who are not often in church or regular readers of Bible. The occupation of shepherd was a popular one in the Old Testament and some of the most respected leaders of the Old Testament spent some time working as shepherds. After being raised by Egyptian royalty, Moses spent quite a lot of time shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law before answering God's call to return to Egypt and lead God's people out of slavery, through the wilderness and into the promised land where they would be free to worship God. As a young boy, before his was selected by God to be anointed to become one of the most respected, powerful and loved kings of Israel, David was a shepherd.

Perhaps God has a special affection for shepherds. Shepherds are a type of caretaker. They care for and take care of their flocks. They look after their flocks. Make sure they have good food to eat and good water to drink and keep them safe from predators and rescue their flocks from situations they get themselves in, even if that means going into dangerous places and taking risks. Some historians tell us because shepherds had to work hard, and their work kept them from observing the religious rules and rituals they were considered rough and looked down on by more civilized folks. Other historians say that is rubbish, and that shepherds, especially the shepherds that looked after flocks of sheep owned by the religious temples or royalty were considered outstanding citizens who sacrificed the comforts of home and family to care for animals that their economies and religious communities depended on. It's sometimes hard to get a clear picture of history because there are many lenses we can look through. But whether they were noble or outsiders, God seems to like shepherds a lot. That's who the angels appeared and gave the good news to when Jesus was born in Luke's Gospel.

Maybe God seems to like shepherds because that is how God wanted people to see and understand God; not just as creator, but as our divine Care Taker who shows us where the good food and water are, who is with us no matter where we go, and will save us from dangerous situations we get ourselves in, and even died for us to show us the depth of his love for us and to redeem those low times in our lives. Maybe the image of the Good Shepherd isn't just Christian artists' favorite image, maybe it's God's favorite too.

Remember, theologians tell us the purpose of the Incarnation, of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us in the person of Jesus is that Jesus was the image of God, showing us who God is. That might be why Jesus answered those questions about his identity using one of God's favorite images. And why Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd, reminding us God isn't a distant, cruel destroyer of life, God isn't an unmerciful judge looking for the opportunity to punish us for our mistakes, nor is God out for revenge, and looking to destroy whomever has hurt us or who we want to

suffer. Just the opposite is true: God loves us and wants to be with us to show us the beauty of the world God made, and the joy of connecting with God and the world and each other. Because that's what God made us for. Remember back in the book of Genesis it says that humankind was made in God's image and God called humankind to care for the beautiful Garden they lived in. Caretaking was a mindset and activity we are supposed to share with God, and how we show God to others.

The trouble is we forget that. We forget why we were made. We forget that we were made in God's image and instead try to play God by making God in our image: what we choose to be or wish we could be. That's how those images of God as violent judge who hates who we hate, likes who we like, and punishes those we want punished came to be. But that is not the image Jesus showed us. Jesus showed us the Good Shepherd. Maybe so we'd remember who we are, and whose we are, and turn and follow the Good Shepherd into the places he leads us.

Images are powerful, they can be quite effective at getting our attention, and can help us remember what we forgot. Maybe that is why the image of the Good Shepherd was the first one early Christians used to depict Jesus. Instead of trying to draw an accurate portrait with his correct eye color, hair length, skin color, size of his nose, length of his beard, style and color of the clothing he wore, type of shoes he wore, like we are used to in our modern times, early Christians showed Jesus in the image he wanted to be seen as: The Good Shepherd. Who came to be with us, show us the way, to die and rise so that now nothing can ever keep us from the love of God in Christ. What Jesus looked like doesn't matter as much as the image he wanted us to see. The Image of the Good Shepherd isn't about what Jesus looked like, it is about who he is, and who we are to him and to God: the beloved he created, loves, and cares for; wants to work with, cares so much for there is nothing God won't do to be with us. That is who we follow.

It's such an important image and reminder, that the Church has set aside the 4th Sunday in the Season of Easter to devote our readings and hymns to remind us the Risen Jesus is the Good Shepherd, which is why we call today Good Shepherd Sunday. This year we are incredibly fortunate to receive a new image, a special kind of image called an icon of the Good Shepherd that we will bless and put up in this church which already bears his image in our name. In all the documents this parish has so carefully preserved, I have not yet been able to find anything that explains why the name Good Shepherd was chosen for this parish; but it is a very good and apt name for a parish located in the middle of a university. Because it reminds us of our purpose, our mission and our identity. We identify with the image of the Good Shepherd, and therefore are reminded we are here to show that image in what we do and what we say to those in our community. Whether it is feeding the hungry, opening the doors of

our chapel daily so that people can find a quiet place of rest and prayer, or using secular symbols like the TARDIS to show that the church is a place of hope, where there is room for all because the church at its best, like the TARDIS is bigger on the inside, or providing ways to help people get items they need in our new thrift store ministry, or participating in our local economy by providing local jobs, direct source coffee that helps people and their communities in other countries, and showing there can be more to a business than greedy consumerism through our new coffee shop ministry, all our ministries help show the world the image of the Good Shepherd who loves and cares for them and calls all of us into the life the Good Shepherd leads us into.

With the generous gift of this beautiful icon, we now have a visual reminder of who we follow and who we are. We are not THE Good Shepherd, but we are his followers, and we can show his love and care to the world around us. Those of you who know about icons know that there is more to an icon than art. An icon is a sacred kind of art. Some call icons “windows into heaven” and are ways of viewing God’s Kingdom through the person or event depicted in the icon and – just like any window – is a way for heaven to look back at us. This kind of visual interaction makes icons helpful in prayer. With the gift of the icon of the Good Shepherd we are given much: a reminder of Who we follow, of who we are, and another way of praying, of being present to God, listening to the voice of Christ, and sensing the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

So that, no matter what day it is, we can remember nothing we do here is something we do alone; we have each other, and we have our Good Shepherd, the Risen Jesus, with us through it all.