

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 10:11-18

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

April 22, 2018

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Good morning. As you know, I typically like to start my sermons with a story – something that helps us understand and apply the readings for the day. But today, we are going to do something a little different. I thought it might be worthwhile to take you through my thought process as I write a sermon each week. And so today, we are going to spend time breaking down portions of our readings in a process we like to call exegesis.

What's exegesis? It's simply the steps we go through in interpreting and applying biblical texts. It's how we study text and make sense out of what the original writers might have been trying to communicate. It involves looking at the historical context, translating the text from Greek or Hebrew, and applying it to our current day lives. At the end, hopefully we end up learning something about the Good News that we need to hear on any given Sunday.

This week I had the best time going through this process and hopefully you will, too. So let's begin.

When I first read our lectionary texts for the week, I start to ask questions. I look at what stands to me, what sparks my curiosity, what I don't understand. I simply try to notice and observe.

Here's what I first noticed this week - our Gospel reading from John starts with those lovely, familiar words...I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The story starts off nice enough. It conjures up images for me of Christ with a lamb over his shoulders, a pastoral scene with gentle back lighting, a content and calm animal, and a strong and capable shepherd in white flowing robes. You know the scene. But then I noticed that it goes on to say something about a cowardly hired hand...the guy who sees a wolf coming and in his fear runs away to avoid any personal pain and trouble. It's a stark contrast. One that left me thinking...thank goodness I'm not that guy.

After all, no one wants to be the one who bolts when the going gets tough. So as I kept asking questions I began to wonder...what is that hired hand really running away from? In all of the images I have ever seen of the good shepherd – there always seems to be a great deal of peacefulness with little to no effort. In fact, I've never seen an image of Jesus, the good shepherd breaking a sweat. So why run away? What's so hard about being a shepherd anyway?

These were my initial reactions to the readings this week. I was curious about this well-worn image of the Good Shepherd and also deeply curious as to why or why not this would be a job someone wanted to take on. And so began step 2 of the exegetical process. I began looking into the historical context. What is a shepherd's job really like?

It turns out, it's a pretty difficult task. And to help us get a better picture of the job, I want you to put aside all of the images you have ever seen of the so-called good shepherd. I want you to put them aside so that we can rebuild this image that is so central to our faith and see what we have when we are done. And possibly, we will be able to answer my own question of why the hired hand didn't take on the job.

One of the best ways to build historical context is to pick a focal point to research. So, for our purposes, I chose the shepherd's crook. Do you know how this simple stick with a curved top is used? Most of us think that it is there to reach out and pull back a sheep in trouble, to save them from a fall or from a predator. That's true. In these terms, it's a symbol and a tool of care. That's the pastoral use that comes to mind – safety and comfort.

But, how else is the shepherd's crook used?

The crook can also be used as a weapon to fight off predators – to swing or to jab at a threatening animal or even a thief. The blunt end can be used to push a sheep forward who is lagging behind or who may need a little encouragement to move into new territory. And it also can be used for balance as the shepherd walks across rough terrain. It's has a lot of uses.

Now, I want you to imagine the face of the shepherd in these different scenarios...if he were fighting off a hungry wolf, the dirty clothes, the tired arms. Think of the energy and the determination that would be required. Imagine the face of the shepherd as he encourages a sheep forward. His expression full of patience and wisdom as he walks slowly always looking at what is ahead. And then, imagine the face of the shepherd as he walks step by step over loose rocks, trying to keep himself stable as he never loses sight of the sheep in his care. His body tired after a long day of walking in the heat and on the dusty ground.

All of the sudden, our pastoral image of the Good Shepherd becomes a little more complicated. The good shepherd isn't just the person who easily carries a tired sheep on his shoulders. It's the person who has stood up to adversity and danger. It's the person who has said the words that needed to be said when the situation was difficult to face. It's the person who had to find confidence and strength within themselves to do the job that needed to be done.

So this morning, put aside the simple image of the good shepherd. Replace it with the image of the tired, worn out, dirty, exhausted, and emotionally drained good shepherd. The one who gave everything he had to make sure that the one he loved was happy, healthy and safe. No wonder the hired hand ran away. This is no easy task. And yet, it's one of the central images of our Christian faith. It's one of the most important examples we have of what it means to walk the walk and talk the talk. The Good Shepherd. The tired shepherd. The dirty shepherd. The brave and courageous shepherd. How much more beautiful this image becomes as we build our understanding of what this symbol truly means for us.

And I have to tell you...all of this context made me so intrigued with how I have always understood Psalm 23 in light of this expanded vision of what that good shepherd is all about.

And I asked myself...and I will ask you this morning...what is the 23rd Psalm trying to tell us when it says...the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want? That question brought me to the next stage of exegesis – biblical translation.

So I started to dig a little deeper into these tried and true images. And to help you do the same, I thought it might be helpful for us to have a little Hebrew lesson this morning as we try to comprehend these well-worn words. I love going back to the original texts because you may or may not know this but Hebrew can be a rather difficult language to translate to English. It's a beautiful language full of rich meanings but unfortunately many of the words do not have an exact translation to the English language. The result is that scholars have done their best over the centuries to interpret and translate ancient texts into words and phrases that we understand today. Unfortunately, we often lose the richness of the original intent.

Psalm 23 is no different. For our purposes, let's focus on verse 6 to get a more well-rounded meaning of the good shepherd. Now, the King James Version, the version most of us have memorized over the years reads like this...Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. But other translations state it this way...

Truly, blessing and mercy will be with me all the days of my life; and I will have a place in the house of the Lord all my days.

Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.

Surely goodness and loyal love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will stay in the house of Yahweh {for a very long time}.

Maybe to you the differences are subtle. But here is what is actually going on. Our familiar word "follow" is better translated as "pursue". As in surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me. And, the word "surely", is thought to be better translated as "only" as in *only* goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me. And "dwell" is better translated as "to return to".

So what we may eventually come to understand as we re-translate these familiar words is that the Lord who is our shepherd will give us this...

"only goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life and I will continually return over and over to the house of the Lord throughout my life."

I hope you are following along. Because now, after we have some historical context and after we have looked at some Hebrew translations we get to ask ourselves...what is the Good News that we need to hear from this?

I think the Good News is this...The good shepherd is part of our life long journey – through our ups and downs, through the dark valleys and the green pastures. It's a good shepherd who has promised to literally pursue us in our times of greatest need and in our times of beautiful joy. A shepherd who abundantly restores our soul when we feel lost and who helps us make the right decisions when we don't know what to do, who comforts us and who welcomes us back again and again when we make the wrong choices.

It's a good shepherd who is willing to do the hard work right beside us, who carries us and supports us when we can't get through another day on our own, who pushes us forward when we don't have the strength or the courage or the confidence to step up to the plate, who protects us from the bad things that painfully upend our life when we thought we had everything together.

No wonder the hired hand skipped town. It's a lot of work being the good shepherd!

But, that's the promise of our faith. That's the foundation that Christ provides for each of us. He's the good shepherd that is with us when the road gets tough. So don't for one minute think that the good shepherd is with us just when it's easy. Because it's so much more than just carrying that little lamb on his shoulders at the end of the day.

So, maybe instead of the image of the calm shepherd in white flowing robes, you remember the shepherd's crook and think of the face of the shepherd when he is tirelessly protecting you. Remember the shepherd when he is actively saving you. Remember the shepherd when he is persistently pushing you. Remember the shepherd when he is confidently holding things steady so that you can grow and thrive.

No, it's not a job for everyone but it's the job our savior Christ has taken up for each of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.