

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ
The Second Sunday after Easter

Lessons:

The First Lesson:ⁱⁱ Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the thirty-fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.ⁱⁱⁱ

“For thus saith [SETH] the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.

“... ”

“Thus shall they know that I the LORD their God am with them, and that they, even the house of Israel, are my people, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD. And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:^{iv} Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the tenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.^v

“... Jesus said, I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and know my sheep, and am known of

mine, even as the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The Second Sunday after Easter has long been known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” after our Second Lesson, which is the Gospel appointed for today. It focuses on the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd of His people.

The Bible uses much imagery involving sheep. In many ways, the economy of Israel was based on sheep, shepherding, sheep shearing, and wool production. Thus the people of Biblical times were individually familiar with sheep, even if they themselves did not deal directly with them.

We today are, mostly, unfamiliar with sheep and their properties. If we have seen a sheep close-up, it has most likely been in a petting zoo. We certainly do not have any experience in how sheep behave, either individually or in flocks. That makes it a bit more difficult for us easily to comprehend the Bible’s imagery regarding sheep.

Sheep in general, and lambs in particular, have long been regarded as emblems of innocence. A sheep is trusting, and shows no guile or wariness at our presence. But sheep are unintelligent animals, and seldom if ever are able to identify danger from their actions. They may recognize predators, but do this more from ancestral instinct than from understanding. Left to its own devices, an individual sheep will graze contentedly on its own way, without regard to what the rest of the flock is doing, so that after a little time, a compact group of sheep will, by a process akin to diffusion, spread out extensively. Thus one job of a shepherd is to keep his sheep together, so that they do not stray too far.

Also, a sheep cannot protect itself from predators; it has no sure defense mechanism against the like of wolves or lions. Another job of the shepherd is to protect them from those who would prey upon them.

Since a sheep is docile, it easily submits to being sheared. When done properly, this benefits both the shepherd, who thereby gains wool from which cloth can be made, and the sheep, by relieving it of a heavy coat as the weather begins to turn hot. But this very docility leaves it especially vulnerable to predators who would do it ill.

In our First Lesson today, it is the ruling class of Israel—the kings, nobles, members of the Sanhedrin, priests and Levites—who are being admonished. While I don't know the specifics of their exactions, they are easy enough to imagine. They imposed fees for any service required by the people of the government, they were subject to having their land and goods taken, ostensibly for public use but actually for private benefit, by a process akin to our eminent domain.

They were required to pay exorbitant prices for the animals they were required to sacrifice in the Temple. In return the people received nothing of value. Should they become ill, they were not helped. Should they be injured, not solace was offered. As Matthew Henry puts it: "That all their care was to advance and enrich themselves and to make themselves great." Like sheep, the average Jew had little choice but to accept such impositions. But these actions did not fare so well in God's sight.

God indicates that the people are His sheep, and that He will take care of them.

It is in this context that we should see our Gospel lesson. Jesus says He is the Good Shepherd. We, of course, are now in a better position than Jesus' disciples were when Jesus made these statements to understand exactly what He meant when He said "I lay down my life for the sheep." It is by His offering of Himself on the Cross that our sins are expiated. It is through Him that we have the expectation of eternal life.

Let us also note the ending of our Second Lesson: “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd.” By this, Jesus is telling His disciples that His mission and His sacrifice, are not only for the Jews, but for all mankind who will hear and accept His Gospel. The one flock is the Church, and it must remain faithful to Jesus’ leadership as our Good Shepherd!

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April 26, 2009

ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxiii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ezekiel 34:11-26, 30-31 (KJV).*

^{iv} “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

^v *St. John 10:11-16 (KJV).*

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