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Sunday 30th April 2023

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Rev’d Angela Rigby

**Call to Worship**

Hallelujah! Sing to God a new song **Praise God in the company of all who love God.**

Let everyone celebrate their Creator **Let us celebrate the One who leads us**

Let us celebrate with dancing: **Let us play music and sing**

Why do we celebrate? **Because God delights in the people of Her Creation.**

***from Psalm 149:1-5***

**Prayers of Approach and Confession**

Holy God, compassionate teacher, teach us your ways of living and loving.

Connect us Your steady heartbeat that vibrates throughout the whole of Creation.

As we move throughout your world,

may our rhythms of dance, our ways of being, please You.

Help us not to simply mimic the movements of others,

but help us to each draw closer to You,

listening to You and being the person You have called us to be,

as we live our lives to praise You.

God, sometimes we misstep.

We lose our balance.

We neglect to notice where we are placing our feet.

We are distracted by other sounds.

Or, the ground shakes, and we become frozen in fear.

God in those moments when we forget Your joy, Your dance – we are sorry. Amen.

**Declaration of Forgiveness**

”Let us praise God for his glorious grace, for the free gift he gave us in his dear Son!

For by the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven.

How great is the grace of God, which he gave to us in such large measure!”

*Ephesians 1:6-8a GNT*

**All Age Introduction**

Harmony Hill Farm Sanctuary is an organisation that rescues farm animals, and they came across this sheep that had been used as part of a high school project in the States. For six years, the sheep had been penned up, given food and water, but had little contact with humans and no contact with other animals. She was isolated, alone, and hadn’t even been sheared – her fleece just left to grow and grow, becoming tangled and matted. The wool hung over her eyes, so she couldn’t even see.

Anyone could see this sheep was miserable. She was being kept alive by the food and water, but she wasn’t enjoying her life.

First thing the volunteers at the sanctuary did was name the sheep, because she didn’t even have a name. Ellie Mae

They sheered her and bathed her – under the wool they discovered she had eyes. Now Ellie Mae could see the world around her.

They introduced her to other animals at the sanctuary – llamas, other sheep – soon Ellie Mae had friends.

They discovered that Ellie Mae began to run to the volunteers who were caring for her, as she recognised their voice and recognised them as someone who looked after her and cared for her and wanted the best for her.

If you watch the video of Ellie Mae’s story, there is this wonderful moment where the volunteer tells Ellie Mae she can go run and jump and have fun, - she doesn’t have to stay in the pen - and off she goes – bounding out the pen and into the open fields where other animals are waiting.

Who was the better shepherd in the story?

The animal sanctuary gave Ellie Mae a new beginning, a better way of living, an identity and a community. Is this not what God wants for each and every person on this planet?

You might want to download the video from here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QJhlvHSJjc>

**Prayer for Inspiration**

God, we pray You would speak to us.

Through the hymns, the prayers, scripture,

or even through the words shared in the sermon,

God, we pray we would hear from You today.

May the words we speak, pray and sing

and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to You. Amen

*based on Psalm 19:14*

**Readings**

*Ezekiel 34:1-11* | *St John 10:1-18*

**Sermon Notes**

What does Jesus mean when he says “I am the gate”? Is he keeping someone out? Are others keeping people penned in? Or a bit of both? What does Jesus mean when he says “I am the Good Shepherd”? What kind of shepherd is Jesus? How does he care for people? He says, “I have come that they may have life and life to the full.” Does having a Good Shepherd mean that there are bad shepherds? What makes a bad shepherd? How does Jesus care for us? How do we respond to his care?

Springboards: a few ideas for a ‘way in’ depending on the direction you decide to travel

* Dollar Store Children Sermons – Pastor John Stevens of Zion Lutheran Church in USA posts ideas using items found around the home or at the Dollar Store. He follows the lectionary and you can search as well https://dskidsermons.com
* Show a sheep video or talk about video
* Sheep given identity, community and choice https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QJhlvHSJjc
* Sheep changed in unpredictable way simply by feeding https://youtu.be/SUyGe0WrME8
* If your license allows, listen to a song about shepherds or sheep. Contemporary song or folk song that means something to your fellowship. Even the story of a song can be a useful prompt for contextualising this story. Some examples I have found are: *Good Shepherd of my Soul* by Stuart Townend, *Good Shepherd* by Jefferson Airplane, *Hear the Lambs a-Cryin’* sung by Paul Robeson, *Psalm 23 (I will trust in you alone)* by Stuart Townend, *The Shepherd’s Song* by Willie Scott

Context of John 10:1-18:

Three things I found helpful to understand when I looked at this passage:

1. In the Bible, especially in the Hebrew scriptures, leaders are referred to as shepherds, and the people as the sheep. This may not be an image we are familiar with today, and some folks would not appreciate being referred to as a sheep! However in the Bible, it was just a metaphor that made sense in their culture and context. This is the imagery being used in the Ezekiel 34, with God stepping up and caring for the people because the leaders had failed to do so. Also see Isaiah 40:9-11, as God “tends his flock like a shepherd.”

2. Jesus says these things during or just before the festival of dedication (John 10:22) – also known as Hanukkah. During this festival, the people remember how the Greeks had defiled the Temple around 200 BCE, but then how a Jewish army led by the Maccabees defeated the Greeks and won the Temple back. The Temple was cleansed and dedicated again for God’s purposes. In the Temple was an “eternal flame” which required oil to keep lit. They had enough for one night, but the oil lasted 8 days until they could get more oil. (Thus Hanukkah being 8 nights long.) During this festival, the priests meditated on Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23:1-4; 25:32-38, and Zechariah 11 – which focus on leaders as shepherds and God as the Shepherd of the people.

3. Read the conversation in John 9 between the religious leaders and the man who was healed. What Jesus says in John 10 is right after that confrontation. It sets the scene for what Jesus says.

Jesus is certainly pointing to himself as the Good Shepherd, just as God is the Good Shepherd of the people. But more is going on here.

John 10:1-10: Jesus the gate – Jesus isn’t a robber sneaking in to steal sheep. Jesus is not a stranger. People respond to him. He calls people and leads them out, protecting them as they go. In the previous conversation in John 9, one of the accusations thrown at the healed man was “You follow this man, but we follow Moses!” Is Jesus saying that he is not stealing people from them but rather he is caring for people as is his right and duty as a shepherd? They were trying to keep the man in a state of exclusion, but Jesus calls him back into community. Perhaps that is why Jesus focussed on the need for the sheep to leave the pen sometimes? In John 10 verses 9 and 10, the idea of salvation here, of being “saved” or “kept safe” depending on the translation, is about physical needs, emotional needs and spiritual needs. Like the healing of the man in John 9, Jesus’ safety is holistic – protection, restored to community and kept well. “Life to the full”, not just breathing.

John 10:11-18: Jesus the Good Shepherd - Here Jesus states the differences between him the good shepherd and bad shepherds. Good shepherd will protect the sheep with his own life, whilst a hired hand will run away and leave the sheep to be harmed. Jesus then talks of how his people know him, just as he knows God. Jesus talks about people outside of the Jewish faith perhaps (other sheep) who he also wants to save.

Jesus’ shepherding ultimately is about the welfare of the people, that they may thrive and not just survive, but it is also about relationship, that they may be in relationship with him as he is with God.

So what? How do we respond to Jesus’ care for us?

When we discussed this passage at our church Bible study, we discovered some possible takeaways for congregations. These are prompts. You may like to choose one or think of your own.

* Encourage people to reflect on their own attitudes. Do I want to keep folks penned up, contained and controlled? Or am I concerned about their welfare and helping them thrive as human and as Christian?
* Reflect on pastoral care and how we can encourage people to thrive
* Reflect on how inclusive we are as a fellowship. Who do we close the gate to? Who do we exclude? Inclusive Church has resources that can be helpful if you go down this path. [www.inclusive-church.org](http://www.inclusive-church.org)
* Reflect on your church’s role in your community. If Jesus is the gate and the Good Shepherd and as disciples we are meant to follow in his footsteps, what does that mean for the church’s role in community? How are we encouraging people in our community to thrive?

**Prayers of Intercession**

*There is a response inspired by Psalm 5:8. When I say, “Lead us, God, in Your ways of just living,” if you could please respond with, “Make plain Your paths before us.”*

Holy and just God, we look to You for guidance.

We ask for Your wisdom for the leaders at work in our world.

Some may be inspired to serve You and the world You created,

whilst others may seek to serve the gods of power, popularity and self.

God we lift up the leaders at work in our world.

Lead us, God, in Your ways of just living: **make plain Your paths before us.**

God we pray for political leaders –

those who lead countries, counties, cities, and local councils.

Whatever their political affiliation,

we pray that they will work together to serve Your purposes,

serving all the people within their area of influence.

We especially pray for the decisions they make

in regards to how the oppressed and marginalised are treated.

We pray for politicians who are truth tellers, justice seekers, community caretakers,

good neighbours, and leaders of compassion.

Lead us, God, in Your ways of just living: **make plain Your paths before us.**

God we pray for leaders in the cultural sphere,

those influencers in media (print, film, social media, canvas, fabric and sound)

who both challenge and inspire us.

We pray for those who push boundaries that attempt to confine

with their artistic passion,

as well as those who call for restraint with their precision.

We pray for all those who lead in their cultural sphere of influence.

Help us to be critical consumers, aware of what we consume,

but equally help us to celebrate diversity of thought and creativity

in the people whom You created.

Lead us, God, in Your ways of just living: **make plain Your paths before us.**

God we pray for the leaders in the Church.

We give thanks for people who will serve the global, national and local churches.

We pray for the URC General Secretary, General Assembly Moderator,

the Moderator Elect, and Synod Moderators.

Guide them as they lead us through the Church Life Review

and this period of transition for the URC.

We pray for courage and inspiration for our Ministers,

Church Related Community Workers, Local Church Leaders, Church Secretaries,

Elders and all those who lead local churches.

We pray for Junior Church and Youth group leaders.

Lead us, God, in Your ways of just living **make plain Your paths before us.**

God as you call all of us to “lead” people to a closer relationship with you,

we pray for those around us - our “flock.”

People at work, school, in our families and in our community

whom we meet and have conversations with.

God we pray that we are good shepherds,

caring for the people we meet in the words we speak and the actions we take.

In this quiet, we lift up to you the concerns and those known to us.

*Silence kept*

Lead us, God, in Your ways of just living **make plain Your paths before us.**

We lift all these prayers up in Jesus’ name. Amen

**Offering and Prayer**

How do we respond to God’s love?

There are many ways – helping a neighbour, caring for a family member,

volunteering in the community, donating to a charity, and giving to our local church.

For all these ways of responding to God’s love and care,

let us pray and offer these to God.

Loving God, we thank you for your care for us and for this world.

We offer you our time, our gifts, our hearts, our whole selves,

and ask that you use them to share your kin-dom community

of belonging and compassion to everyone. Amen.

**Blessing**

As we prepare to leave this time of worship together,

remember that as we go, as we wander, Christ goes with us.

Christ walks beside us. Christ goes before us. Christ follows us.

Christ leads us as we wander. Let us listen for His voice.

Let us send each other out by singing a blessing together.

*(Angela suggests Singing the Faith 477)*

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| **Hymn Suggestions** | | | | |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| *Teach me to dance to the beat of Your Heart* |  |  | 477 | 936 |
| *The Lord’s My Shepherd ( I will trust in you alone)* |  |  | 481 |  |
| *Good Shepherd of my Soul* |  |  |  |  |
| *Come with me, Come Wander* |  |  | 462 |  |
| *The King of Love My Shepherd Is* | 552 | 462 | 479 | 649 |
| *All People That On Earth Do Dwell* |  | 63 | 1 | 20 |
| *There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy* | 353 | 187 | 416 | 683 |
| *Ah Holy Jesus* |  | 381 |  |  |
| *You Lord are both Lamb and Shepherd* |  | 355 |  |  |
| *Source & Sovereign, Rock & Cloud* |  | 133 |  |  |
| *How Sweet the name of Jesus Sounds* | 277 |  | 322 | 251 |
| *May the Sending One Sing In You* |  |  | 477 |  |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* StF – *Singing the Faith* MP – *Mission Praise*

You might also like Marty Haugen’s *Shepherd Me O God*

https://hymnary.org/text/god\_is\_my\_shepherd\_so\_nothing\_shall\_i