

**Easter 4
John 10:11-18
May 3, 2009**

This particular Sunday after Easter, the fourth Sunday, is often referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” It’s a day when the lessons combine to focus on this enduring image of God as our shepherd. It’s a day when we recite the 23rd Psalm, and hear some portion of the Gospel of John where Jesus refers to himself as a shepherd.

But in this day and age, shepherds are not the sort of person we encounter in our daily lives. Even though we live near a large university with a great agriculture program, even though the campus is home to the Sheep Teaching and Research Station (don’t you imagine sheep holding forth at the front of a large lecture hall, or bent over microscopes in a lab?), most of us really know nothing about sheep or about shepherds.

So I wonder if maybe we shouldn’t ponder other images for God and for Jesus, metaphors that might make more sense for folks like us. Maybe the Lord is more like a coach than a shepherd. Maybe that’s a simile we can get our minds around. So I’ve come up with a slightly altered version of the 23rd Psalm that might help us with this image. See what you think:

**The lord is my coach, I shall not dog it.
He makes me run sprints on green playing fields;
he leads me beside buckets of Gatorade.
He reviles my fatigue. He leads me through his game plan, for the
team’s sake.
Yea, though I play an away game in a hostile stadium
I shall fear no officials.
For he is with me.
His whistle and his play book, they comfort me.**

**He has implemented a spread offense in the presence of our enemies,
and we will run the table.
He protects my head with a helmet,
My cleats run over the opponents.
Surely his wisdom and screaming tirades shall follow me all the days of
my life
And I shall sit on the 50-yard line forever.**

It's a nice thought, especially when you think about high school and college coaches, how much influence they have on young people. There is a shepherding aspect to their work with youth and young adults. I know one of the greatest moments in my daughter's life was when the field hockey coach praised her for sticking through a tough period and told her, "I have nothing more to teach you." The power of that affirmation has carried her for years now.

But a Good Coach is still not the same as a Good Shepherd. Coaches cut players off the team. Coaches keep the weaker players on the bench. Coaches spend more time with the starters. Coaches delegate to their assistants and don't spend that one-on-one time with all the players in the way we might imagine. And if the grass looks greener on the other side, and the money is better, the coach picks up and leaves – yes, Nick Saban, I AM talking about you.

And that's not at all the kind of figure Jesus is trying to describe in the gospel lesson today. There is something to this shepherd image that does not translate into a modern equivalent. There is something deep and powerful going on in this metaphor. There is something very important about shepherds – especially Good Shepherds -- that Jesus wants us to understand.

First of all, this is not a metaphor about us, about how we are like sheep. This is a metaphor about God, how God is like a shepherd. Listen up! When Jesus starts a sentence by saying "I AM," especially when he does it in the gospel of John, that is a sign for us to sit up and take notice. Because "I AM" is God's very personal, very powerful, name. It is the name of the Lord of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the One who called to Moses out of the burning bush. When Jesus says "I AM" he says something about the very nature of God, and also about Jesus' own essential purpose.

“I AM the Good Shepherd,” he says ... not to his friends, but to his opponents. This statement is directed at Pharisees and others in Jerusalem who complain to Jesus about his teachings and his healings. Like that old line on Saturday Night Live, Jesus says to them, in essence, “I’m the Good Shepherd ... and you’re not.”

They are hired hands with no investment in the flock, cheap laborers who run away when the wolves come howling, who leave the sheep to be snatched and scattered. They are phonies and frauds, weak-minded and weak-willed.

God is not like that, Jesus says. He is not like that, either. “I AM the Good Shepherd,” Jesus says. “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Lays down his life for the sheep. Think about that for a moment. And please don’t jump ahead in your minds’ eyes to the cross and Good Friday. Just think about the shepherd for a moment, standing on a lonely hillside. Imagine the sheep huddled behind him as he turns, staff in hand, to face the wolves that circle just a few feet away.

Imagine this man, this shepherd. He’s no figure in a Sunday School story. He’s no dreamy-looking hippy from a Bible bookstore poster. He’s rough, scrawny, wiry, with hard hands and leathery skin. He lives in the open, under the burning sun and the harsh wind. He spends more time with his animals than with other human beings. He knows them. He knows their needs, their moods, their habits and their fears. And there is nothing he won’t do to keep them safe. Nothing.

He’ll take on every wolf, every thief, every possible threat to his flock. His staff, his own physical strength, and his stubborn determination are his only weapons. But when threatened, he doesn’t flinch. When pressed, he doesn’t falter. When everyone else would run, he stands. He stands and does not yield.

Jesus is like that. God is like that.

So I think if we want to go looking for a 21st century equivalent of the Good Shepherd, the metaphor that works best for me is not the football coach. It's Clint Eastwood. No, not Dirty Harry. Although some days when I am hard-pressed I would love to see Jesus turn up and face down those who trouble me by saying, "Go ahead, punk. Make my day."

But in this case, I'd rather think about Clint Eastwood in his most recent movie, *Gran Torino*. It's wonderful movie, filmed entirely in Michigan with a Sexton High School student in one of the main roles. Eastwood plays a retired auto worker, a Korean War vet who did things in battle that he'd rather not discuss. His children have long since moved out to Grosse Pointe or West Bloomfield and left their widowed dad behind in the city, where the old neighborhood is now filled mostly with Hmong immigrants from Southeast Asia. He's lonely, bitter, grieving his wife, and also one of the most unrepentant racists in cinema.

But he gets to know his Hmong neighbors, and slowly he becomes involved in their lives, their rituals, and their struggles with local gangs. Eventually, the gangs close in on his teenage next-door neighbors, and it becomes clear to Eastwood that something must be done, or no one will ever live in peace. The neighbors won't complain to the police. They are too afraid.

So like a Good Shepherd, Eastwood takes action. He puts his affairs in order, and goes to the house where the gang hangs out. In public, on the lawn, he calls them out. One by one, the terrified Hmong neighbors peep out of their windows to watch what will happen. Eastwood puts a cigarette in his mouth, asks for a light, then reaches into his jacket. The gang opens fire, and Eastwood is slaughtered. It turns out he was reaching for his 1st Cavalry Division Zippo lighter. He was unarmed.

The sight of this white American, their neighbor, their friend, laying down his life for them breaks the neighbors' silence at last. The gang is arrested, with plenty of witnesses to testify against them. Their power is broken. The neighborhood is safe. And Eastwood's young Hmong neighbor inherits his prized 1972 Gran Torino, a symbol of both sacrifice and new life.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He doesn't run away. He doesn't back down. At all costs, against all odds, he places himself between his flock and every possible danger.

God is like that. Jesus is like that. And with a shepherd like that, there is nowhere, nowhere we cannot go ... from the greenest pastures and the stillest waters to the black and terrifying emptiness of the valley of the shadow of death. Our Shepherd walks beside us. And we have nothing to fear.