

“THE SHEPHERD AND THE LAMB”

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

April 25, 2010 - Easter 4C “Shepherd Sunday”

John 10:22-30, Revelation 7:9-17, Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

–John 10:27

“They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

–Revelation 7:16-17

Although a relatively small number of people make their living herding sheep, there are plenty of occupations where one has oversight and care for people and for their possessions. We have many examples of people who have taken this position seriously and have shown extraordinary care of their charges. The world cheered the bravery and skill of Capt. “Sully” Sullenberger when he brought his plane to a safe landing on the Hudson River, saving the lives of all his passengers and crew members. He became an instant celebrity and lifted the spirits of many folks who found little good news to celebrate.

Another example is Capt. Richard Phillips of the ship *Maersk Alabama*, which was attacked by Somali pirates about a year ago. When the crew retook their ship, cheers went up around the world. But what caught the public imagination was the report that Capt. Richard Phillips offered himself as a hostage in order to make sure his crew was released unharmed.

To further the image of his selflessness, we read in his report to the “Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation” these words of praise of his crew:

“The entire crew did what American mariners are always ready to do—put themselves at risk to protect their vessel and its cargo. Chief Engineer Perry, Chief Mate Murphy and the entire licensed and unlicensed crew of the *Maersk Alabama* deserve our thanks and praise.ⁱ”

Then, last November, Phillips received the inaugural National Maritime Valor Award from the Nauticus National Maritime Center.ⁱⁱ His fame, like that of Sullenberger’s, continues. His hardcover book, “A Captain’s Duty: Somali Pirates, Navy SEALs and Dangerous Days at Sea,” was released just 3 weeks ago,ⁱⁱⁱ and a movie is in the works.^{iv}

Somewhere deep inside us, no matter how callous our society may seem to have become, we still admire selfless acts such as those of these two men. Each had responsibility for the safety of both people and a huge transportation vessel.

There are many who take their position of trust seriously and carry out their duties each day without any fanfare or public acclaim. From the store clerk who has gone out of his or her way to take care of you to medical professionals working long hospital hours. And perhaps the most obvious example is that of a caring parent.

Unfortunately, we also have plenty of examples of people who have turned out to be the worst of shepherds, and some are even worse than the wolves we fear. Bernie Madoff comes to mind immediately as one who had the welfare of many people in his care, but did not care for them but

only for his own financial gain. And the list of politicians whose acts have belied their self-interest is fairly lengthy.

Biblically, too, there are negative examples. For example, just a chapter before our gospel lesson today, we have the story of the man born blind, for whom Jesus restores sight. There's a nuance there that is easily overlooked. When the Pharisees question the blind man's parents, asking how he can see, the parents answer, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself". Now, lest we think these are parents simply encouraging a young man's confidence and independence, the narrator explains, "His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him'. Finding themselves in danger, they abandon their son.^v This negative example immediately precedes the beginning of chapter 10, where Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd, in contrast to those hired hands who "see the wolf coming and leave the sheep and run away" – much like the parents of the blind man.

Jesus has, instead, claimed the actions of a "good" shepherd, one who puts the care of the flock above any of his one interests, and even above his own life. He knows his flock and is known by them. **There is a relationship between the sheep and the shepherd.**

A colleague of mine tells this story:

"My first full-time assignment as a parish priest found me working in an inner-city neighborhood in Boston during the integration crisis. It was a diverse neighborhood; different racial and ethnic groups lived close to each other. Some lived with that diversity with ease; others with tension. I met an interesting Greek fellow once who worked in his native land as a shepherd when he was a young man. So I quite naturally asked him what it took to make a good shepherd. He was quick to answer. First, you have to know every sheep by name. Second, you need dogs – you can't drive a herd of sheep without dogs. And thirdly, you need to be quick to whack a sheep upside the head when they wander away from the sheepfold." My friend continues, "I loved it! What an image, I thought, and year after year I've told the story of the old Greek I met in Boston. An active, virile, Jesus busy indeed among the sheep. He knows us each by name; he sends his angelic host (just like the dogs that keep the herd together) to tend us. And finally, he often gives us a good whack upside the head just when we need it most. This is my Good Shepherd!"^{vi}

But today's readings do not begin and end in John's gospel. We have the reading from Revelation as well, and it is the source of my sermon title. Revelation contains some of the most comforting words in all of scripture, but also some of the most paradoxical: Here in chapter 7, verses 16-17, we read: "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

We all cling to that last phrase, that God will wipe every tear from our eyes. But what about the paradox in the middle: "for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd"? I find this consistent with the many paradoxes in scripture — author N. Graham Standish has even written an entire book on them, entitled *Paradoxes for Living*. He cites such phrases as "for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2Cor 12:10) and "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." (Luke 2:24)

And here we have the Lamb that was slain – the new Passover Lamb, whose blood was shed for the New Covenant we celebrate in Holy Communion – this Lamb is also the Good Shepherd. He not only protects his sheep, but has lived as one of them.

So what are we to take from these lessons? Do we just sit back and let the Good Shepherd gift

us with salvation and rest on *his* laurels? Somehow, I don't think so. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." To follow him means that we need to emulate the Good Shepherd – the one who came in humility and reigns in benevolent power. We need to identify the flock for whom we're responsible . . . our neighbors and our community, as well as our sisters and brothers of faith.

There is a story told by a now-elderly man who has been very successful, who says he has had a happy life. But it wasn't always that way. He was born in Germany and was sent to one of Hitler's concentration camps. After years of terrible suffering, he was one of those who survived the war. He told of the months of wandering, along with millions of people in Europe whose lives were devastated by the Nazis. Home destroyed, relatives murdered, property confiscated, this man wandered his native Germany without hope. He said he was standing in a major city one night. It was winter, and he was miserably cold with nowhere to go. He decided that he must choose between a life of crime and suicide. His world was bleak and dark. Then he saw a man who looked as desperate and miserable as he, but who apparently had come across a few coins. The man had just purchased a small cake from a street vendor. As the man who purchased the cake turned to go, he saw the man telling this story standing alone in the cold. He walked over to the man and handed him the cake. The man who related this story said this small act of generosity changed his life. It made him realize that there was still goodness and decency in the world. The light had not gone out of the world. So, from that bit of hope he eventually went on to a happy, successful life. You may never know the effect on someone else of some kind gesture of your own.^{vii} Martin Luther King Jr. observed, "Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."^{viii}

What you need is a shepherd's heart. Amen.

© Robin Lostetter, 2010

ENDNOTES

-
- i. <http://www.marad.dot.gov/documents/PhillipsTestimonyPiracy.pdf>
 - ii. <http://www.2010military.com/military-news-story.cfm?textnewsid=4191>
 - iii. <http://themaritimeblog.com/1898/maersk-alabama-captain-writes-book>
 - iv. The adulation is not without some controversy: in the *Huffington Post*: "Mutiny: Crew Blames Richard Phillips, Maersk Alabama Captain, For Ignoring Pirate Warnings" (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/12/03/maersk-alabama-richard-phillips_n_378134.html):
Captain Shane Murphy of Plymouth, Mass., who was second-in-command during the siege, defended Phillips. "If he was warned to stay off a certain distance and he stayed closer, I'm sure he thought he had a reason for doing it and felt like he was justified in it," Murphy said. "I don't think he was negligent. Maybe just stubborn." (It advised ships to "consider maintaining a distance of more than 600 nautical miles from the coastline." During his captivity, Phillips was initially reported to have offered himself as a hostage in exchange for his crew's safety. In an Oct. 19 interview with AP, he said that was not true and insisted he never volunteered, as crew members and his family reported at the time. "Bottom line, it was the

captain's call," said Capt. Larry Aasheim, whom Phillips had relieved as skipper about 10 days before the hijacking. Aasheim, of Virginia Beach, Va., discussed the piracy threat with Phillips when he turned over command. He says Phillips may have been trying to save fuel and time in not heeding the 600-mile recommendation. "I told him there are advisories out recommending that vessels stay off an increased distance. But he's been on that run for a couple of years. If he increased the distance to 600 miles, it adds 1 1/2 days of transit time and a lot of fuel. You've got to think about that," he said.

Phillips, 54, said he was already a hostage when he struck a deal with the pirates to trade him for their leader, who had been taken by the Maersk Alabama's crew. The pirates reneged, he said.

v. from Dick Donovan's exegesis on SermonWriter: Resources for Lectionary Preaching

vi. Paul Bresnahan in *The Immediate Word*, Easter 4B.

vii. Illustration in *The Immediate Word*, Easter 4B.

viii. *Ibid.*