

P Christ is risen!
C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the day we call “Good Shepherd Sunday,” and we hear Jesus say to us in our Gospel lesson, “I am the good shepherd.” With this statement from Jesus we begin once again to consider this beloved image through our metaphors of shepherds that have been affirmed within us through Holy Scripture...“I am the good shepherd.” In our minds and in our hearts, we turn to these different images and metaphors to discern and define what a “good” Shepherd is and then we rest our thoughts, our ideas, and our hearts in the green pastures beside the still waters, but is this really what Jesus is teaching us today? Is Jesus teaching us how to choose a shepherd? Do we really get to choose a shepherd that we feel is good enough to lead and guide us?

On the wall of my study at home I have a very faded black & white photograph of my great-grandfather William Kopp standing at the side of his horse drawn milk carriage. My grandfather Percy Kopp Sr. used to tell us that the horse knew the route better than old Will knew it. Which brings to mind...it was a horse that knew the way over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house. In either case, who is the shepherd, the horses, the milkman, or the family heading to Grandma’s house?

Today from our assigned portion of the “Shepherd Discourse” from John’s Gospel, Jesus is attempting to open our hearts and our minds to something more than just a pedestrian understanding of sheep and shepherds. I am the good shepherd. This comment in our English language, along with our understandings may set up our thinking in terms of good verses bad. Jesus then reinforces that thinking by making an explicit distinction between good and bad by explaining how we can recognize a good or a bad shepherd. And from *our* very established and stayed images of shepherds we begin to think we then know what is good and what is bad or that we can even begin to follow the good rather than the bad. But do sheep choose their shepherds? Do we follow good or do we end up following what we assume to be good? Do we follow what we ought or do we simply follow what we like?

From the prophet Ezekiel we hear that Israel thought they were following the good shepherd, or at least a shepherd they thought was good enough to follow:

^{34:1} [Ezekiel says] The word of the Lord came to me: ²Mortal, prophesy against *the shepherds* of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them. (Ezekiel 34:1-6)

Ezekiel's prophecy fits easily into our context today, we seem to be the mentioned sheep without the shepherd following the wrong gods and or the wrong shepherds. Or maybe following the shepherds and the gods we conclude are good. It seems today that we don't want our shepherds to be simply "GOOD" but seek shepherds that are powerful, strong, successful, or individualistic and like our theological choices, we like our shepherds as unique and individualized as the choices that we make in a cafeteria based on our hunger rather than what's going to actually feed us. In the end we have not been led to green pastures beside still waters...instead we have either fired or impeached our shepherd and we follow the only god we know and trust...ourselves.

Today with the primary elections creeping ever closer and the presidential election looming on the horizon, we may be tempted to juxtapose this discernment of a shepherd in terms of our elections and attempt to choose or elect a "good shepherd." Henry Adams, whose dates are, 16 Feb 1838 to 27 Mar 1918, was a U. S. historian, journalist, novelist, and educator, as well as the great-grandson of John Adams and grandson of John Quincy Adams, comments on why I believe that our discernment of a shepherd does not play out in our political arenas. Adams felt that:

Politics...have always been the systematic organization of hatreds.¹

And once we have chosen our shepherd as well as the path of hatred we wish the shepherd to guide us, Adam goes on to comment in the late 1800s that he:

firmly believes that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control. Someday science shall have the existence of mankind in its power and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world.

Well, it didn't take many centuries, it only took only one to see the reality of the threatening overtones of Henry Adams' writings. A.I. Artificial Intelligence, is not an engine in the sense that Adams understood an engine, but it is a powerfully threatening science that will not strengthen the weak, that will not bind up the injured, will not seek out the strayed, will not seek the lost nor die for us, but will simply be an empty heartless shepherd leaving us scattered over all the face of the earth. Jesus tells us then that the *good* shepherd lays down his life for the sheep and that the hired hand acting as a shepherd runs away when threatened...but then in my mind, is one better than another when in the end the sheep are left on their own in either case.

When Jesus tells us, I am the good shepherd, he is not asking us to pick or choose between good or bad, he is telling us that he is the (*καλός*) shepherd, or rather, the "proper" shepherd, or the "true" shepherd. When we read this in English as the good shepherd, it makes the distinctive contrast and this seems to evoke a choice rather than Jesus simply explaining what a "proper" or "true" shepherd really is.

This passage is not about *our* choice between good and bad...nor how we choose a "good" shepherd, it is about God's relationship with us as a shepherd. We are at times just like Ezekiel prophesied, like sheep without a shepherd, wandering about thinking we have by choice gained control of our journey with God. But the reality is...by our choice, we wind up following the wrong gods, following the gods of our choosing...following the gods who serve our whims and

¹ Adams, Henry Brooks, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Editor: Henry Cabot Lodge, release date: January 1, 2000 [eBook #2044]
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desires and when they don't, we will cry out for another and once again other shepherd will answer our self-serving bell and once again another messiah meets a violent farewell.²

The Good News for us today is not about good verses bad, rather the Good News is found in the relationship God has with us through the "Proper" Shepherd, the "True" Shepherd who knows us...and knows us better than we know ourselves. Today, here in this place, God has gathered each one of us...equally...not one seen as good, or as more important than the next...but gathered us all into a flock that becomes the very body of Christ...a body...a flock...that is lead and guided to be the caring shepherd for the lost, the sick, the weak, the downtrodden, the disenfranchised, the outcast, and on and on.

Through this flock...this very church, God's wondrous love, mercy, and grace continues to reach but and to shepherd us and those who are just like us, the sinner, the lost, the timid, the feeble, the sick, and the dying...so that all may dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the shadow of the Almighty where their faith is also cared for and nourished in Word and Sacrament.

In this gathering, God through the great shepherd of the sheep, Jesus Christ, has led us all out and delivered us all from the snare and the deadly pestilence of sin and death. Through our faith in Jesus Christ we know that God will revive our soul as we walk through the darkness of this world and at the last *gather us* in green pastures beside still waters. We the church are a gathered and forgiven flock who become a people who, in word and in deed, witness to the power grace and forgiveness as a present reality among us. God has called and gathered us by the Holy Spirit, and through the blood of His Son Jesus Christ, he has purchased us, forgiven us, and made us His own. So let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. So that, by this all will know that we are guided like a horse drawn cart by the truth and love that shepherd us and attends us...

in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Adapted from lyrics of *Learn to be Still*, © 1994 Black Cypress Music / Matanzas Music / The Night Rainbow Music ASCAP, written by Don Henley and Stan Lynch and recorded by the Eagles. The song is one of four studio tracks on the live album "Hell Freezes Over."