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SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

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I PETER 2.19 ST. JOHN 10.11

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Take care of my lambs...take care of my sheep...watch over those entrusted to your care...and be a good shepherd to my people. Jesus told Peter to take care of his Church...to take care of his people. (St. John 21.15-17)

Sheep are mentioned more than 500 times in the Scriptures...more than any other animal. Sheep were important to the agricultural life of Jews and other people who lived off the land. Sheep are also used to symbolically refer to God's people...and he loves them.

The first shepherd we read about in the Bible is Abel. He took care of his sheep and God blessed him. His brother Cain was jealous of the blessings Abel received from God and killed him. Abel was also the first murder victim. (Gen. 4.8)

David was the young shepherd boy who was very good with a slingshot. He learned to trust in God no matter how tough things got. He wrote, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. Your rod and staff...it is they that console me." (Ps. 23. 1, 4)

Isaiah gave God's people words of strength and comfort when he wrote, "He will take care of his flock like a shepherd; he will bring the lambs together and carry them in his arms; he will gently lead their mothers." (Isa. 40.11).

When it comes to their safety sheep aren't too smart. They are safe in their sheep pen...but out in the open...they wander off and get lost. They have no sense of direction...finding their way back home is next to impossible. Isaiah also wrote, "All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way." (Isa. 53.6)

Sheep may not be too smart but to the farmer who makes his living from his sheep they are precious and personal possessions. If one sheep wanders off, the shepherd will go looking for the lost sheep until he finds it and brings it home to the safety of the sheep pen. Sheep are not totally clueless...they do know the sound of their shepherd's voice and they will come to him...and to no other shepherd. They know in the sound of their shepherd's voice they will find the safety they can't find on their own.

People are not sheep and we have the intelligence God gave us to make decisions about our lives. We make good decisions that are consistent with God's will for us. Sometimes we make bad decisions that have adverse affects on our relationship with God and others. We can be like sheep that have gotten lost...fallen down...gotten messy and dirty.

"Mary had a little lamb"...goes the 19th century nursery rhyme..."it's fleece as white as snow". Cute...but not the way things really are in sheep world. Sheepskin secretes an oily substance called lanolin. It coats the wool and helps keep the sheep warm in the winter. It also acts as a magnet for dirt and anything else the sheep come into contact with. A blog I read recently called sheep huge walking Velcro strips.

Isaiah also wrote we are like sheep about to be sheared. (Isa. 53.7) Sheep have to be sheared for their own good. Wool, like hair, continues to grow...and grow...and grow. The lanolin-saturated and dirty wool coat becomes so heavy for the sheep...it falls over on its back...and can't get back up. Without the shepherd to upright the sheep...it will die.

Jesus is THE Good Shepherd...there is no other Shepherd like him. He does exactly what God told Ezekiel he himself would do...he comes looking for us when we wander off and get spiritually lost. (Ezek. 34.12) Sin makes our lives messy and weighs us down...we fall down and can't get back up without help...Jesus rescues us and brings us back into the Light that is himself.

People are not sheep but sometimes we act like them. We sometimes run off in different directions without thinking about the consequences of our actions. We are sometimes swayed by the prevailing opinions of the world in which we live...which is frequently at odds with what we know to be true about our Faith.

Peter reminds us that we WERE like sheep that had lost our way, but we have been brought back to follow the Shepherd and Keeper of our souls. It's good to be home, where we are safe in the care of the Good Shepherd who loves us...and we love him.

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