

EASTER II 2016
SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
FATHER JOHN ALTBERG
John 10.11, Hymn 345



Last week I spent some time looking across an idyllic expanse of island where sheep, many with spring lambs, were grazing. Thoughts turned readily to today...Good Shepherd Sunday...and today's Gospel...and the hymn we have just sung.

The care – or herding - of sheep has changed a good bit over the past two thousand years...fences have replaced sheepfolds, immediate danger has been reduced as wolves have become rare in our part of the world, dogs now help guard and guide flocks while shepherds of our day ride in trucks – some places in helicopters or airplanes - and watch the sheep from considerable distance with binoculars.

Jesus used a sheep/shepherd analogy not just because sheep are cute and both were abundant but because it fit his own situation so well...he is the shepherd who laid down his life so others could live.

Consider for a moment how shepherds lived and worked at the time. The sheepfold was made of field stones...closed on all sides...the shepherds brought the sheep there for the night and guarded them at all times...they lived together. Sheep are not known as hurdle jumping animal athletes so they do not readily jump over walls...the way in and out of the sheepfold was the shepherd lying over the wall and the sheep walking up and down on his back...sounds uncomfortable!

The sheep and their shepherd were bonded for life...they got to know one another...the sound of the shepherd's voice was known to the sheep and they would follow him...and him only. The sound of someone else would confuse the sheep...they would scatter in all directions

The point is, while the care of flocks has evolved considerably [at least] in our part of the world, sheep are still the same creatures - without guidance and protection they get into a lot of trouble...no change on that front!

The analogy Jesus made is as real today as then. Saint John's Gospel recounts Jesus talking with a group of people about being a shepherd...how shepherds care for their sheep no matter how tough it gets. However people didn't understand what he meant...apparently said something...I don't get the shepherd analogy...what does **that** mean? So, said Jesus...let me explain ...

Here are the facts: I am the real shepherd. All those before were phonies and the sheep would not listen...whoever follows me will be saved. I am here to give my life for the sheep. When the shepherd is a fake and the wolf shows up, he runs away: the wolf snatches the sheep and that's the end of the sheep.

A compelling conversation with the Jesus who appeared on Palm Sunday, set a new standard on Maundy Thursday, kept his promise of ultimate sacrifice on Good Friday and reappeared on the first day of the following week – Easter Sunday.

Today let's consider what kind of shepherds WE...what are we willing to do when the wolf shows up, do we stay the course, that entrusted to us or cut and run?

Jesus told the story about sheep not as part of an animal rights campaign but because people are just like sheep - get into really bad situations when they stray from where they are supposed to be...they must be rescued to survive. The genuine shepherd will go after them – intervene when they wander into dangerous situations. Being a shepherd is not always easy...shepherds often find themselves in cold, dark, rocky and unpleasant places because they care for and about the sheep.

Jesus. the true shepherd, the King of Love, gave everything. Bishops and priests [with deacons helping] are called to be shepherds before anything else. Among the symbols of a bishop is a shepherd's crook. The word **pastor** simply means shepherd. It is not just clergy who are called to be shepherds...all are called to be shepherds. This week's compelling question...what is my personal commitment to shepherding?.

