

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER: YEAR A

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

APRIL 30, 2023

St. David's Episcopal Church

N. Chesterfield, Virginia

Ruth Partlow

TODAY IS AFFECTIONATELY CALLED “GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY”. EVERY YEAR ON THIS SUNDAY, WE READ A PORTION OF JOHN 10, JESUS’ TEACHING ON THE GOOD SHEPHERD. WE’RE FAMILIAR WITH SO MANY IMAGES OF JESUS AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD: JESUS TENDING THE SHEEP – JESUS WITH A LITTLE LAMB IN HIS ARMS – JESUS WITH A LAMB DRAPED AROUND HIS NECK, JESUS WALKING IN THE HILLS WITH THE FLOCK. AS YOUNGSTERS THESE ARE SOME OF THE IMAGES WE FIRST ENCOUNTERED IN SUNDAY SCHOOL. TO YOUNG CHILDREN, JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD. IT’S A BEAUTIFUL WAY TO DESCRIBE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, WITH JESUS. IT’S AN IMAGE PROJECTED BOTH IN THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENT. OFTEN, THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM IS ONE OF THE FIRST PSALMS WE LEARN IN SUNDAY SCHOOL. DO YOU REMEMBER ALL SUNDAY SCHOOL PICTURES OF JESUS AS THE GOOD SHEPHERD? I DO!

TODAY I WANT TO FOCUS ON THREE IMAGES – VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE TRADITIONAL THE SUNDAY SCHOOL VERSION. EACH IN SOME WAY PLAYED A ROLE IN SHAPING MY OWN WALK WITH JESUS CHRIST. SO, PERHAPS I SHOULD CALL THIS DAY “STORIES ABOUT SHEPHERDS” SUNDAY. EACH REVOLVES AROUND SHEEP AND SHEPHERDING. EACH IN ITS OWN WAY SETS FORTH IDEAS ABOUT LIVING A STRONG VIBRANT CHRISTIAN LIFE. THE FIRST COMES FROM A CHILDREN’S BOOK. THE SECOND COMES FROM AN ETCHING THAT HANGS IN MY HOME. THE THIRD FROM AN ALLEGORICAL NOVEL RECOMMENDED TO ME MANY YEARS AGO.

THE FIRST BOOK IS A CHILDREN’S NOVEL HEIDI BY JOANNA SPYRI. IT WAS MY FIRST EXPOSURE TO THINKING ABOUT WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN TO CARE FOR SHEEP –

TO BE A SHEEP HERDER. I READ IT SOMETIME WHEN I WAS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL – AROUND NINE OR TEN. IT’S THE STORY OF A VERY YOUNG SWISS GIRL WHO, IS SENT TO LIVE IN THE ALPS WITH HER RECLUSIVE, ANGRY GRANDFATHER. HE HAS A FLOCK OF SHEEP. HE WINTERS WITH THE SHEEP IN A VILLAGE IN THE VALLEY AND DURING THE SUMMER LIVES HIGH IN THE SWISS ALPS IN A SMALL ISOLATED CHALET NESTLED AMONG THE HILLS. HEIDI LEARNS TO HELP HER GRANDFATHER, TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS, AND IN TIME CAME TO LOVE HER GROUCHY GRUMPY GRANDFATHER. SHE LEARNS TO CARE FOR AND WATCH OVER HER GRANDFATHER’S SHEEP. SHE ADAPTS TO THE HARD WORK AND CLOSE ATTENTION NECESSARY TO CARE FOR THE SHEEP. SHE GROWS IN SO MANY WAYS – AT SCHOOL IN THE VALLEY, LIVING HIGH ON THE MOUNTAIN DURING THE SUMMER. SHE LEARNS TO KEEP AN EYE ON THE SHEEP SO THEY STAY SAFE AND CLOSE. SHE BECOMES ADEPT AT MOVING THEM FROM ONE SECURE PASTURE TO ANOTHER, AND TO MAKE SURE THEY HAVE ENOUGH GRASS TO BE WELL NOURISHED.

THE SECOND IMAGE COMES FROM AN ETCHING THAT HAS HUNG IN MY HOME OVER THE YEARS. MY PARENTS GAVE IT TO ME WHEN THEY WERE CLEANING OUT CLOSETS. IT HAD BEEN GIVEN TO THEM BY A FRIEND WHO OWNED AN ART GALLERY IN CHICAGO AND BELONGED TO THE CHICAGO ETCHING SOCIETY.

THIS ETCHING IS NOT LIKE ANY OF THE FAMILIAR GOOD SHEPHERD PICTURES OR PAINTINGS. INSTEAD IT IS OF A TIRED SHEPHERD SITTING PENSIVELY ON A ROCK SURROUNDED BY SHEEP. MOUNTAINS LOOM IN THE BACKGROUND. IT’S POIGNANT, LONELY. THE SHEPHERD IS RESTING – CLEARLY EXHAUSTED, EVEN DOZING WHILE TENDING THE SHEEP. IT’S DIFFICULT TO TELL WHETHER THE SHEPHERD IS A MAN OR A WOMAN. THE CLOTHING COULD BE FOR EITHER. THE ARMS LOOK STRONG AND MUSCULAR – BUT SHEPHERDING REQUIRES STRENGTH AND FORTITUDE WHETHER

MALE OR FEMALE. THE FACE IS DRAWN, THIN AND TIRED. SOMETIMES IN MY IMAGINATION, I SEE THE SHEPHERD AS JESUS IN ONE OF THOSE MOMENTS WHEN HE HAD DRAWN APART, WEARY FROM DEALING WITH HIS SHEEP –THE DISCIPLES, ALL WHO CAME IM SEEKING HIS MINISTRY, HIS HEALING, WISDOM AND PRAYER. IT’S AS IF HE IS CONSUMED WITH SADNESS KNOWING WHAT IS YET TO COME.

BECAUSE IT SEEMED SO STARK, I DIDN’T HANG IT FOR YEARS. BUT NOW I REALIZE IT SAYS SO MUCH ABOUT THE GOOD SHEPHERD -- THE CONSUMING WORK, THE DEDICATION, AND THE STRESS AND STRAIN OF THE TASK OF TENDING TO SHEEP. WAS THIS WHAT THE ARTIST WAS TRYING TO COMMUNICATE? COULD THIS BE A GLIMPSE OF A TIRE, VERY HUMAN, JESUS, WEARY WITH ALL THAT CONFRONTS HIM? TOO OFTEN WE SEE THE STRONG, POSITIVE LOVING SIDE OF JESUS AND FAIL TO REFLECT ON THE COST OF HIS MINISTRY AND MISSION. FOR ME, THIS IMAGE COMMUNICATES A DEPTH OF LOVE AND CARE THAT BRINGS WEARINESS AND STRESS. IT ASKS ME THE QUESTION, “ AM I CAPABLE OF REACHING OUT WITH THE SAME LOVE AS CHRIST? AND ASKS ME, “CAN I DO AND BE ANYTHING LESS?”

THE THIRD IMAGE COMES FROM A BOOK I READ AS A YOUNG ADULT ALMOST 50 YEARS AGO. I HAD JUST BEGUN MY CHRISTIAN JOURNEY IN EARNEST. I WAS VISITING MY PARENTS IN FLORIDA. ONE SUNDAY, THEIR RECTOR RECOMMENDED A BOOK CALLED – HINDS FEET IN HIGH PLACES BY HANNAH HUNARD. IT IS A CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY – SOMEWHAT PARALLELING OUR OWN SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS. IT TELLS THE STORY OF *MUCH AFRAID*, A PHYSICALLY DEFORMED YOUNG WOMAN, REJECTED BY HER FAMILY AND SOCIETY, WHO MEETS A KIND SHEPHERD. HE BEFRIENDS HER. THROUGH MANY WORRIES, INSECURITIES, DIFFICULTIES, FAILURES, SADNESSES IN HER LIFE, *MUCH AFRAID* COMES TO RELY ON THE MINISTRY AND LOVE OF THE GOOD

SHEPHERD. THROUGH HER TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS *MUCH AFRAID* GROWS INTO A STRONG CONFIDENT FOLLOWER OF THIS GOOD SHEPHERD.

SO HERE YOU HAVE IT: TODAY, INSTEAD OF GETTING A LEARNED SERMON ON JOHN 10:1-10 AND THE GOOD SHEPARD, YOU'VE GOTTEN TWO BOOK REVIEWS AND COMMENTS ON AN ETCHING. EACH IN ITS OWN WAY IS TELLING ABOUT THE GREATER LIFE – THE LIFE OF WALKING WITH AND LIVING WITH JESUS DAILY.. EACH REMINDS US THAT LIFE IS FILLED WITH UNEXPECTED DIFFICULTIES AND EVENTS, BUT WE ARE NEVER ALONE. WHENEVER I AM IN TROUBLE, THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS WITH ME. AS IN THE NOVEL HINDS FEET IN HIGH PLACES THE GOOD SHEPHERD ALWAYS COMES LEAPING AND BOUNDING OVER THE HILLS AND THE MOUNTAINS TO HELP US AND *MUCH AFRAID*.. GOD IS ALWAYS WITH US! WE ARE NEVER ALONE. JESUS THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS FAITHFUL AND TRUE TO HIS PROMISE OF LOVE AND CARE.

BOTH THESE TWO BOOKS HEIDI AND HINDS FEET IN HIGH PLACES AS WELL AS THE ETCHING OF THE SHEPHERD HAVE BEEN FORMATIVE IN MY OWN CHRISTIAN WALK. EACH HAS A UNIQUE WAY OF SHEDDING LIGHT ON WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW JESUS AND BEING A LOVING CHRISTIAN PERSON. THEY MAY BE FROM MY EARLIER LIFE, BUT THEIR MESSAGES LINGER IN MY MEMORY AND IMAGINATION. THEY HAVE BEEN AND ARE A PART OF MY OWN CHRISTIAN FORMATION AND WALK.

I PRAY THAT EACH OF YOU MAY FIND AND PONDER SUCH BITS OF INSPIRATION AS YOU FOLLOW THE GOOD SHEPHERD THROUGHOUT YOUR DAILY LIVES. MAY WE ALWAYS KNOW HE WALKS WITH US IN GOOD TIMES AND DIFFICULT TIMES. WE ARE A PART OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD'S FLOCK.