



**At A Distance – Sunday April 3, 2020 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**“Mama, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Shepherds”**

Good Morning Saints and Blessed Ones. We welcome you again this morning to our All Saints Community wherever you are joining us from today. We are grateful for you, and the Spirit and Energy you bring are blessings.

Today our Sacred Story is a classic. The “Good Shepherd” is a much revered and greatly loved traditional Christian story. Most of us are very familiar with the image of Jesus as The Good Shepherd and followers of the Jesus Way have crossed into the Spirit World for generations listening to the strains of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...” Also, today, the Gospel Writer John utilizes a second, common image in early Christianity and that is Jesus as “The Way” and “The Gate.” These ideas leading to the phrases “the straight and narrow” and Johns crafting of the words... “no one gets to the Father except through me.” We are going to take on John’s image of Jesus as “The Gate” later this week in our “At A Distance” Reflection, so stay tuned for that.

But, this morning Saints, we want to take a look at the classic image of Jesus as Shepherd in a slightly different way, uncovering perhaps some different understanding and learnings about those “lamb chasers” in our Message today entitled, “Mama, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Shepherds.”

Mona and I both love Willie Nelson. His music has graced us decade after decade and his melodies and lyrics have become classics from Austin, Texas to around the world. One of our favorites of Mr. Willie's songs is, "Mama, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys."

***"Mama, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys***

***Don't let 'em play guitars, and drive them old trucks,***

***Let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such."***

Well that same song was very applicable, with some slight editing on my part, for 1<sup>st</sup> Century mamas as well. With deep apologies to Mr. Willie...here goes:

***"Mama, don't let your babies grow up to be shepherds,***

***Don't let them live stinky and carry a crook,***

***Don't let them chase lambies through crannies and nooks."***

The reality of the First Century occupational status hierarchy was that shepherds were at the very bottom of it. No First Century Jewish mother would in her right mind, encourage her child to become a shepherd. Living in the elements, being stinky and foul smelling most of the time, eating what you could find laying around, working for basically nothing, being alone and isolated, trying to keep a wandering and curious flock together, fighting off predators armed only with a stick, never having any formal education. It sounds like Willie's lament translates perfectly back into the First Century. The educational reality of those times was that about 1% of the Jewish population could read or write, and shepherds typically resided at the very bottom of that 99<sup>th</sup> percentile. And also, the artistic images that we have of Jesus as the Good Shepherd don't really align with the First Century reality of the occupation and so serves to weaken and dilute the metaphor and

symbolism that John was trying to convey about Jesus. In the paintings of Christian artists, we see Jesus all clean and bright, his long hair beautifully groomed and in place, his robes and clothes clean and new. The sheep also were all just sparkly white. The reality is that shepherd's hair didn't see a cleaning for months on end. And robes and clothes were often covered in birthing blood from the lambs, and predator's blood from battles with predators. And the sheep were covered with thistles and ticks and fleas and all manner of nasty and undesirable flora and fauna. ***"Mama, don't let your babies grow up to be shepherds..."*** Shepherding then not only made the shepherds social outcasts for obvious reasons but religious outcasts as well, since under Jewish law they were ritually, religiously and ceremonially, unclean by definition, having to deal daily with blood and dung and dirty animals on a daily basis. No one saw them as "heroic and noble protectors of the food chain," but as societal "bottom dwellers" that while they performed a necessary societal function, no proper First Century Jewish mother would want their daughter to invite one home for supper.

It is almost completely in the Gospel of John that we find this reference to Jesus as The Good Shepherd. So where is John going with this image of Jesus? In most of John's Gospel we have dramatically opposite and contrasting images of Jesus lofty and powerful images as Son of Man, The Logos "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and The Word was God." Complex Jewish, and Greco-Roman philosophical concepts, roles, personas and images. The Gospel of John and the later work attributed to him, The Revelation are the most theologically and philosophically dense of all the Gospels. When compared to the relative simplicity of the parable-driven Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, John has Jesus speaking and doing in a deeply different and more sophisticated and more "learned" way than any other Gospel writer. Sometimes, I must confess that it is

difficult for me to see the “historical Jesus,” the itinerant Galilean apocalyptic preacher speaking like John has Jesus speaking. But for me Saints, while I personally struggle with a lot of John’s writing, with the Good Shepherd story I believe John gets the message spot on. This image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd rings through clear, crisp and strong.

For me, the image of Jesus as Good Shepherd has three pieces that we find in all excellent leaders, both secular and spiritual: humility, guidance and protection. Humility, Guidance and Protection...basic components of the Jesus Way from the beginning. No stronger symbol for the Shepherds trinitarian role is the Shepherd’s crook. Let’s have a look at the crook.

The shepherd’s crook was the multi-tool for First Century shepherds. The curved end “**The Staff**” was used to first, **guide** the sheep and secondly to **untangle** them when they got trapped in the dense and thorny underbrush that was everywhere. The reverse end, the “business” end of the crook was **The Rod**. The rod was basically a club that the shepherd used to engage and deter predators... to **protect** the sheep. From Psalm 23, we learn, “Thy Rod and Thy Staff they comfort me...”

For us, in the role of the Good Shepherd, Jesus is strongly modeling the behavior that he wants us to repeat and embrace. Here it is... Humility **with** each other; Guidance **for** each other; and Protection **of** each other. These Shepherd roles form classic basis of our All Saints Vision and Mission of Gather, Transform and Send.

Blessed Ones, the essence of the Good Shepherd story: Humility with each other – Guidance for each other – and Protection of each other.

John portrays Jesus here, not as the King of Kings or the Lord of Lords. Not as the Son of Man...mighty, all powerful, all knowing; but as one at the very bottom of the societal food chain, yet still living life with courage and dignity and honor. Modeling humble leadership, yet strong leadership none-the-less. Using all the tools given, both sides of the Crook...the staff to guide and the rod to protect. Is Jesus the Good Shepherd in this story. Yes, of course. **But the new message here for us is... so are we!** As we continue to live and walk the Jesus Way along with our own rich, deep and personal Spirit Journeys, we transition back and forth between the role of sheep and shepherd. We pivot between being student and teacher. Both acquiring and dispensing wisdom continuously, and we live, learn and love our paths along the Jesus Way. Sometimes receiving Humility, Guidance and Protection and sometimes offering it. This is Spiritual Leadership of the highest order modeled by Jesus and lived through the Good Shepherd in all of us.

So, Saints how do we live into this “Good Shepherdness” that Jesus is teaching us today. What’s the plan, what’s the execution strategy? How do we humbly guide and protect? By our continued embracing of our Baptismal Vows. Our Baptismal Vows, that Covenant, that Holy Contract that we made with Creator when we “said yes” to walking the Spirit Way. When we affirmed these words! Remember?

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”

I will, with God’s Help.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

I will, with God’s Help.

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

I will with God’s Help.

The Good Shepherd Story lived out each day as we re-affirm our Baptismal promises not by continually saying them, but by continually doing them. Proclaim-Seek and Serve – Respect all in the context and example of Jesus and us the Good Shepherds, humbly guiding and humbling protecting.

Hm...maybe we need to change the words of the song after all...

***“Mama please let your babies grow up to be shepherds***

***Humbling guiding and showing the way,***

***Protecting the sheep with the Vows that we say!”***

Kind of catchy...I’ll check with Willie, maybe we’ve got a hit.

Blessings Saints and Thank You all...Amen.

