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St. Stephen's, Newport News, VA
Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 22, 2018, Year B

Acts 4: 5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Shepherd People, Shepherd

This is what is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” and this is the story of a Shepherd people on a Sunday morning, welcoming a visitor who steps in off the street.

“Hi! My name is Joe” his name tag reads as he stands in the parish hall at coffee hour. He looks a little out of sorts, standing by the coffee urn, a powdered donut snowing on his shirt.

Joe has just moved to the area. He is starting a new life in a new town, and he’s trying out a new idea. He thinks there may be a home for him here, in this church, among these people, who all seem already to know each other’s names. Joe hasn’t been inside a church in years. He remembers only vaguely a place with high ceilings. He recalls wondering as a boy if the high ceilings were meant to hold God in up under the rafters. Where else would God be?

Someone comes up to greet Joe and says, “Hi, My name is Bill -- but everyone calls me Sparky.” It is obvious by his nickname, that Sparky has a history here. Sparky has a story, and a place in a bigger story here. He shares warm ties to other people who are part of that story, too.

So, Joe returns the following Sunday and the one after that, and soon after that he notices that the altar hangings are a different color. A few of the

hymns become familiar. The little girl who sits with her parents in the pew behind him finally smiles at him when he turns around to pass the peace.

After several months, he misses a few Sundays because of a surgical procedure that keeps him home in bed recuperating. He is surprised when a parishioner calls to ask about him. Joe has never been missed before.

He is equally touched when he finds that his name has been added to the prayer list. He signs up to help cook at the annual parish pancake supper. Joe discovers he has a knack for flipping pancakes and is affectionately given the nickname “Flip” by other members of the cooking crew. “Flip” sticks, and that’s what everyone calls him now.

Someone overhears Flip talk about how much he enjoyed skiing in college. His name comes up when the youth group asks for another driver and chaperon for their winter ski trip. He agrees to go, and though he is not a particularly outgoing guy, the kids appreciate his low-key way of making sure no one is left out, and everyone has a good time. They ask him if he would teach their Sunday School class next year.

The class, under Flip’s supervision, decides to raise money to buy children’s books for an after-school tutoring program the church has taken on as a community outreach project.

They decide to serve a pancake breakfast the first Sunday of every month after the early service. The donations they receive generously support their book-buying project. Flip encourages some of them to volunteer as tutors as well. Friendships develop, and the children are sent home with

presents at Christmastime, every gift chosen with a particular child in mind, his or her name printed in big letters on the tag.

This is the story of a Shepherd people, called by Jesus, to call his own, each by name, often quietly, without a lot of fuss, into his abiding love. Through the voices personal and particular, of those who gather to be his Church, he calls his own to him. Many in the world are listening for that voice, sometimes discovering their own true names for the first time, spoken through it.

It is a voice heard in the compassionate concern expressed by a neighbor who shares a cup of tea with a frail shut-in. It is heard in the invitations extended to co-workers who belong to no faith community, but may be willing to give one a try. It is heard in the story of the Good Shepherd read for the first time to a group of pre-schoolers. They know wolves are no laughing matter.

Faithfully, year in and year out, the gathered body of Christ stands watch. Through lean budget years and fat ones, the gathered Body of Christ learns that to stand watch with the staying power of the Good Shepherd is truly a labor of love.

The daily routine of the shepherd, of standing with those sheep day in and day out, is not particularly exciting. How easy it would be to fall asleep. How tempting to leave for a while and seek out a more spectacular view than the pasture has to offer. Forget the wolves; they haven't been seen for a while, so maybe they are no longer out there in the trees, waiting. The hired

hand's not such a bad guy. Why not trust him with the job? He seems reliable enough.

Christ calls the Church to abide in his love, to stay alert, and to risk its life to protect those who are so easily overlooked by a world too impatient and uninterested to stay with them. Christ's love abides in his Church. He lives here, he is not passing through. He does not turn and run. Through the spirit he has given us, we know that love abides in us. Love has made a home and settled here. Love hangs around, explores the neighborhood, introduces itself, tells stories about where it came from and how it got here. Love invites company in to sit and visit. Love offers refreshment.

Where love comes to abide, space must be cleared for the guests who will come to visit and stay. There is room no longer for storing such bulky furnishings as petty insecurities, self-importance, jealousy, and contempt. Others will be arriving soon. When love moves in, the word gets out.

Where love abides, activity may not look like much on the surface. It may appear no more exciting than watching a shepherd watch his sheep. Abiding love sometimes just stands there, too, like the shepherd, watching, so that you'd hardly know anything is happening at all. You'd never guess the wolf prowls about behind the trees.

Abiding love keeps the wolf at bay, greeting people at the door and handing them bulletins. It sits in the chair next to the bed holding hands, saying a prayer, turning back fear. Love stops by and calls up just to check in, unconvinced that the hired help will follow through. Love cooks pancakes.

Love stands still and scans the horizon, watching out for the stragglers and the ones who never quite measure up. Love stands still and holds out a hand to those who get knocked down again and again. Who but love searches out the ones no one else misses when they are not around?

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action,” John writes in his epistle. This love may not often take us into the action-packed drama of Peter and John standing as prisoners in the midst of the assembled powers of Jerusalem, witnessing to the healing power of the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. More often the boldness that God requires manifests itself in no greater action than shaking someone’s hand, learning their name, or telling them your own.

Ours is the story of a Shepherd people, gathered on a green pasture, taking note of the lay of the land. Over there predators hide behind quick fixes and bright promises. Beyond that rocky outcrop a spring-fed stream flows clear. The path to it must be kept clear and open. In this open space no high ceiling holds in God. Listen and you can hear His voice calling your name. Follow it. Hear in a new way the words of today’s Psalm:

23

The Lord is my constant companion.

There is no need that He cannot fulfill.

Whether His course for me points

to the mountaintops of glorious joy

or to the valleys of human suffering,

He is by my side.

He is ever present with me.

He is close beside me

when I tread the dark streets of danger,

and even when I flirt with death itself,

He will not leave me.

When the pain is severe,

He is near to comfort.

When the burden is heavy,

He is there to lean upon.

When depression darkens my soul,

He touches me with eternal joy.

When I feel empty and alone,

He fills the aching vacuum with His power.

My security is in His promise

to be near me always

and in the knowledge

that He will never let me go.