**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC**

**April 26, 2015**

***The Good Shepherd***

**A Sermon for Eastertide by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** John 10:11-18

The Gospel of John is sometimes called the most poetic of the four Gospels because of its memorable Prologue and five unique metaphors for Jesus. Jesus describes himself as the Bread of Life in Chapter 6:35, the Light of the World in Chapter 8:12, the Resurrection and the Life in Chapter 11:25-27, the True Vine in Chapter 15:1-6, and today’s metaphor, the Good Shepherd in Chapter 10:11-18.

**SERMON**

Sheep were a precious commodity in biblical times. You might even call them “gold on four legs.” With little expense for upkeep, sheep provided wool for clothing and mutton for food. And who knows, perhaps on cold nights, shepherds would bed down near their sheep, both to protect the sheep from wolves and to benefit from their wooly warmth.

Sheep provided people with food, clothing and shelter, our three most basic physical needs. So when Jesus identifies himself as the “Good Shepherd,” implying that we are his sheep, Jesus is telling us how valuable we are, how precious we are in his sight, how he would choose to die for us, rather than run away to save himself.

Today when we think of sheep, if we think of sheep at all, we may view sheep as docile creatures, dumb followers, easily led, non-assertive, perhaps even boring. “Blah, blah, blah” sounds a lot like “Bah, bah, bah,” don’t you think?

To be called a bunch of sheep or sheep-like is not a viewed as a compliment. But when Jesus calls us sheep, Jesus means “sheep” as a compliment, and actually Jesus’ metaphor for us is apt. It suits us.

After all, like sheep, we can be lost and need finding. We get ourselves into trouble and may face danger and perhaps even predators, who go after our resources, if not our lives, using identity theft rather than snatching our purse or wallet.

And like sheep, we may follow the crowd, more than we think we do. Anyone for a new iPhone? People around the world crave the latest models.

The beloved Twenty-Third Psalm explains what Jesus means when he says he is our Good Shepherd. The people who followed Jesus and many of those who only heard him speak, knew and appreciated our Lord’s reference to Psalm 23.

Let’s now take a look at the most famous of psalms.

*“The Lord is my shepherd.”* Well actually, the Lord is our shepherd, and we know that, but the Psalmist’s use of the first person possessive pronoun “my” is comforting, you must admit. “*My* shepherd” has a nice ring to it. The Hymn of Response today is a favorite of mine and I hope of yours, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need.” It was written in 1835, so it goes back a ways, almost 200 years.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”* Oh, I shall want plenty of things, but God helps me find and receive what I most need: love, forgiveness and peace at the last. I shall not want them. They are mine. They are ours, when we open our hearts to God.

*“He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters*.*”* In the largely desert environment of the Holy Land, green pastures and still waters are heaven on earth, especially if you are four-footed and graze. Green pastures and still waters are promises of plenty, plenty enough for all. The earth is a Garden of Eden.

*“He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake.”* At one time or another, all of our souls need reviving. When we feel hopeless, when we think we are alone, when we feel lethargic or bored with our daily lives, whenever it is that we are most in need, our Good Shepherd comes and revives us, guiding us along the right pathways, pathways where we need to go, for God’s sake and our own sake.

The Good Shepherd comes to us in many forms, but it is our own task, our own responsibility to recognize him and follow his guidance. Think of how you found West Center Church, for example, and what difference your participation at West Center may be making in your life. Who or what was the Good Shepherd using to guide you to our doors and become part of our church family?

*“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*  Our Good Shepherd is always with us, in glad times and sad times, when we are born and when we die. So, regardless of our circumstances, we have nothing to fear but fear. The Good Shepherd never deserts us; his rod and staff, his punishment and his love, they comfort us. We don’t have to face the wolves (or even the coyotes) alone.

*“You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil and my cup is running over.”* Even though life may be difficult, and we may be experiencing more conflict than peace, our Good Shepherd spreads a table before us, giving us what we need in times of conflict in the presence of those who trouble us. In other words, we are cared for, and those who trouble us can see that we are cared for, even loved, by a higher power, our Good Shepherd, that they can scarcely imagine. The table being spread before us is a sign to others and to us, that those who trouble us will not get the best of us.

*“You have anointed my head with oil.”* In biblical times, bathing was not an everyday occurrence, as it is for many people today. So having our head anointed with fragrant oil would be a wonderful treat, a generous treatment, a joy. Fragrant oil anointing our head makes us feel like a million bucks or a million denari, in the Roman money of the time. Even if the oil is largely symbolic, our anointing reminds us of our Good Shepherd’s love. And if you prefer anointing more actual than symbolic, I have fragrant oil, and will anoint you with oil and prayer.

*“My cup is running over.”* There is no scarcity in the Lord. I don’t have to try to make do with half a cup. My cup is more than full. “My cup runneth over.” I have more than I need. And even if I didn’t have more than I need, I can and I will help those who are needier than I.

*“Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”* Our Good Shepherd is not with us for the short haul. Our Good Shepherd has made an eternal commitment to us. His goodness and mercy follow us, all of our earthly days, and he will make a place for us to dwell, in the house of the Lord, forever.

And yet in spite of all of the above, we do not own the Good Shepherd. He is our Good Shepherd, but he is not ours alone. In the Gospel Witness for today, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

I believe that this statement is less of a call for Christians to evangelize the world and more of a call that the nations live in peace, as one flock. Although nations may be different in many ways, we can try to be supportive of one another, unless, as I believe, human rights are being violated.

Peace with justice, in our hearts, at home, and throughout the world, is the promise and the goal of our Good Shepherd, who calls us by name, who guides us, and only asks that we love one another, as he loves us. Let it be so.

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE**

 *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need*

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