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Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Good Shepherd. It's one of the most familiar and popular images that we have of Jesus. Maybe it's too familiar though. We've heard it so many times that we don't really think about what it actually means anymore. This image seems safe and boring, but Jesus is saying something radical and rich in meaning when He teaches us that He is the Good Shepherd.

So what do shepherds do? They tend flocks of sheep. But what does that entail? They live with their sheep, so close that the sheep recognize his voice. He feeds them, guides them to good pastures, protects them from thieves and predators, and seeks them out when they have wandered astray. The shepherd has a very close relationship with his sheep. Most people in the time of Jesus were very familiar with shepherds. When Jesus called Himself a shepherd, they would have instantly thought of all these connotations.

Additionally, the shepherd was also a regal image. Kings were called the shepherds of their subjects. They were responsible for guiding and protecting the people entrusted to their care. Some kings literally had been shepherds, most famously King David. As a young man, David had tended his father's flocks. We know that David was a musician, indeed many of the Psalms are attributed to him. We can imagine David at the end of a long day, singing a soothing song to settle down the sheep for the night (much like the cowboys of the American West sang to calm their cattle at night on a drive). Hence, the sheep would have known his voice. It would have been something comforting and familiar. During the day, he would have called them by name as he directed them toward the good pasture for grazing.

But it was not all peaceful and quaint. It was hard work, and it also demanded courage. Particularly in the backcountry, thieves lurked just out of sight, ready to seize a sheep from an inattentive shepherd. Predators, too, were a constant threat. Shepherds like David would have to be ready to fend off wolves or lions with a staff or rocks thrown from a sling. (We know that David developed a particular skill with the sling). At night, when the sheep were all safe inside the fold, an area surrounded by a low stone wall or other fence, the shepherd himself would lie across the entrance gate, again protecting the sheep by using his own body as a shield. These are all aspects of shepherding that also apply to the way Jesus cares and protects for us.

Many of the images we have of Jesus the Good Shepherd show His gentle tenderness, sitting serenely cuddling a sheep. That's true and beautiful, but we don't always see the tougher, grittier side of His shepherding. Jesus defends us from evils, fending off the devil and his temptations that threaten to lead us astray. Too often, though, we listen to the devil's deceiving call, and wander just a little off to the edge of the flock. We won't go any further than that. But then it seems safe; nothing bad has happened to us yet, so we wander a little further off, but still in sight of the rest of the

flock. Next thing we know, we're completely lost, and trapped in a thicket, unable to return home to the flock. It is then that Jesus the Good Shepherd seeks us out. There is one image I've seen that illustrates this well. In it, a terrified, bleating sheep is trapped on the edge of a cliff. Jesus, supported by His shepherd's staff, is leaning over to snatch up the poor creature, while fending off the vultures that are swooping in on a potential victim. If you look closely at this image, you'll see that Jesus' outstretched hand bears the wound of the nail from His crucifixion. It is by the merits of His passion that Jesus saves us. It's a dramatic image, and very true to the way Jesus shepherds us.

The Gospels are full of stories about people Jesus who saved. He drove out seven demons from Mary Magdalen. He saved the woman caught in adultery from stoning at the hands of an angry mob. He healed lepers, the blind, and the lame. He fed the five thousand with the miraculous multiplication of the loaves. Jesus sought out the lost, and even made some of them His closest disciples, like Peter who at first asked Jesus to depart from him because he was a sinful man, and Matthew, one of the hated tax collectors. Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. Even as He hung upon the cross, Jesus promised the good thief that he would be with Him that day in paradise.

What about you? If you're listening to this, chances are you're a disciple of Jesus. If you're not, you could become one. Where were you lost? When did Jesus find you and carry you back home with Him on His shoulders? The fact is that every one of us who is a disciple of Jesus was once a lost sheep that He rescued and brought into His fold. It's important for us to remember that, otherwise we're tempted to think that we're His disciple because we're better than others, and that it's by our own efforts. This is not true. We need to remember how Jesus saved us because that humbles us, but it should also inspire gratitude and joy in our hearts.

And Jesus' saving mission is ongoing. Have you and I wandered away again? Let's train our ears to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, so that we can follow His voice, and have the joy of drawing closer to Him every day, beginning with today.