

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 8, 2022 – “Good Shepherd Sunday” and Commemoration of Julian of Norwich
Psalm 23; John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

“The Lord is my shepherd.” These few words that we know so well are truly a great declaration of faith in God’s covenant with us as well as an expression of our relationship with God. This metaphor of shepherd and sheep occurs in many places in the Bible. Today – Good Shepherd Sunday – we highlight this metaphor in scripture, and we honor it in our hymns.

The 23rd Psalm, written eight or nine centuries before the birth of Jesus, describes the Lord as a shepherd who leads the sheep to pasture, to waters that are not turbulent but still – and therefore easy to drink from – and through difficult terrain. In a courageous statement of faith, the psalmist declares, “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.”

The psalmist used the image of the shepherd’s rod and staff in the hands of the Lord. With these implements a shepherd prods and guides the sheep and, when necessary, uses the crook of his staff around the sheep’s neck to haul it to safety. The Lord, the Shepherd, thus guides and rescues the sheep in his care. For the psalmist, the presence of God, the faith that God will guide and rescue him, is comforting – strengthening – even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Before we heard the Gospel we sang “The King of love my shepherd is.” Henry Williams Baker, the 19th century author of this hymn, used imagery from the 23rd Psalm and from the passion of Christ. “In death’s dark vale I fear no ill with thee, dear Lord, beside me; thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.” The hymn reminds us that in Christ the shepherd has come close to the sheep in new ways, in a profound closeness, in compassion, and in sharing the walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

While Jesus journeyed on his ministry of healing and teaching Mark tells us that one day Jesus looked at a great crowd that had gathered to see him, “and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34). When sheep have no shepherd, they follow other sheep, often to danger and disaster. Sheep and people do just this often, don’t they, don’t we? Rabbi Jesus, our teacher, leads us out of danger and onto the path of following him.

Jesus taught the disciples about himself, using the shepherd metaphor. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15). Jesus uses the ancient metaphor from scripture, applies it to himself, and takes it further. The good shepherd does more than guide and comfort his sheep with rod and staff. He is in relationship with his sheep. In today’s reading from John’s Gospel Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” Jesus says more. “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”

Our reading from The Revelation of John is a vision of the ultimate victory of God’s love over the forces of evil and death. The Lamb is Christ who sacrificed his life and is forever at the center of worship in this vision of heavenly glory. The great multitude of people robed in white are the martyrs. Their robes are washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb, meaning that their sacrifice of life is like Christ’s, and they are therefore transformed, purified, clothed in glorious robes. The palm branches in their hands are signs of victory. The promise given is

that the Lamb “will be their shepherd” and shelter them, feed them, and bring them to springs of the water of life.

The Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus, laid down his life for his sheep on the cross. On the cross he traveled through the valley of the shadow of death. On the cross he completed his life of self-giving love. Through Christ’s resurrection from death God’s love is shown to be stronger than evil, God’s life stronger than death. In the cross and resurrection of Christ we see that the way of self-giving love is the holy way of God. And by the cross and resurrection, Christ gives his sheep – those who hear his voice and follow him – the promise of eternal life.

Six hundred and forty-nine years ago a woman in England began to have visions of Christ. She was ill – it was thought near death – and her priest held a crucifix before her eyes. She saw blood trickling down the face of Jesus. That was the first of her sixteen visions. The woman was Julian of Norwich. On our liturgical calendar we honor Julian today.

Julian did not die then but lived for many years as a holy solitary in a cell attached to a parish church in Norwich, England. She reflected deeply on her visions and left a written record of her visions and reflections, in a work known as “Revelations of Divine Love.” This work has comforted and inspired unknown numbers of Christians. Julian has been especially important to women because she so beautifully adds the feminine to our images and metaphors for God.

You may be surprised to hear what Julian writes about Jesus: “Jesus Christ, who opposes good to evil, is our true Mother. We have our being from Him, where the foundation of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly follows. As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. ... Our true Mother Jesus bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may He be. ... Our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with Himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the Blessed Sacrament [the Eucharist], which is the precious food of true life.”

In medieval Europe, there was a legend that the pelican was particularly attentive to her young, to the point of wounding her own breast to provide them with her blood as food when no other food was available. As a result, since about the 12th century, the pelican became a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice of himself for humanity and a symbol of the Eucharist. Jesus our true Mother.

Julian’s image may sound startling to us because we are used to the image of God as Father, not Jesus as Mother. But Julian is saying just what we affirm in our creeds and in our liturgy – that all things came to being through Jesus Christ, that through Jesus we have eternal life and joy, that Christ feeds us with his body and blood in the Holy Eucharist. What she adds is a dimension of tenderness and sweetness in the love of Jesus that we are not always aware of. Bless her for that!

In the church we affirm the truth that God may be revealed to us through other human beings and in relationship with other human beings. We believe this to be possible in our families, where we have the opportunity to live with others in love and compassion. If you have experienced such love from your mother, as a mother, or both, then thank God today for your abundant blessings. If you haven’t been blessed with such love, remember that Jesus is our true Mother whose love is without limit. And may we all remember these words given to Julian of Norwich by the Lord, who said: “I can make all things well; I will make all things well; I shall make all things well; and thou canst see for thyself that all manner of things shall be well.” In the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd and our true Mother. Amen.