*Jesus came so that we may have life and have it abundantly. Help us to live abundantly and help us help others to live abundantly.  Amen.*

Today is appropriately and often affectionately called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The description is apt; and yet, from my friends on Facebook (because as a priest, I have an over representation of priest friends), I have learned that as a culture we don’t know a lot about sheep or shepherds and so there seems to be a necessary educational piece to fill in the knowledge gaps.  I think sheep even intimidate us. Sheep are not a big part of urban or suburban America and not a part of Vietnam (from what I have read).

Honestly, I don’t think we need to know too much about sheep to understand the metaphors. Because we have started with the last line of our reading of John, I think we are good to go. That said, the things you may need to know about sheep and shepherds are the following:

when not out grazing, sheep were often in a pen with a gate that is locked to keep them secure from thieves

sheep actually are not stupid, but do operate with a herd mentality

American sheep herders (also know as shepherds) herd from behind, Middle Eastern shepherds herd from the front and call the sheep by name, particularly when they wander off.

I think this is all you need to know about sheep.

What you need to know about sheep in the Old Testament, long before the Gospel of John was written, is probably more important than actual behavior of sheep. Although we love the image of Jesus as the good shepherd, it is NOT a new metaphor.  And because this is familiar language  for Israel, this serves the Gospeller of John, who of the Gospellers gives us the richest testimony as to the divinity of Jesus.  Aligning Jesus with God by way of familiar metaphors is helpful for the flock to see the divinity of Jesus.

Clearly within our readings today, we see in Psalm 23 the familiar “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” a close intimate metaphor of God as shepherd. In 1 Samuel, David is depicted as the ideal shepherd king. Yet, it is probably Ezekiel 34 who must influences the writer of the Gospel of John, which portrays God as a shepherd of the people of Israel.

The text of the Gospel of John also uses other themes that invoke the Hebrew name of God YHWH, “I AM” in its structure to equate Jesus with life-giving things. I am living water. I am the bread of life. I am the true vine. I am the gate, I am the good shepherd.  Both of these, the Old testament shepherd/ sheep references and the I AM references,  together help convey that Jesus is the Lord, Jesus is the I AM, Jesus is the good shepherd, Jesus is the *logos*, before the creation of the world,  and therefore Jesus is God.

And yet it can be confusing for some… is Jesus a gate? Does he keep people out of Christianity? or keep Christians safe? How can he be the gate and the good shepherd at the same time?  This attempt at trying to figure our confusing scripture highlights where we can get hung up on metaphors and trying to make them work in our own logic system. Perhaps take some consolation in that your priest can only make so much sense of it, but what I do know and believe is that succinctly put Jesus died, rose and lives so that you may have life abundantly. That, I believe, is the main point.

What does it mean to have life abundantly? The reading from Acts tells what it looks like for one community.  It was a community where everyone worked together, and rich sold what was excess and helped poor. It was model of communalism. Even still, it clearly did not work perfectly, as well we know from Ananias and Sapphira who were struck dead when they didn’t work within the system.  Yet, it was a model, even with flaws of how one community could make Christianity work for the betterment of all, so that all could live their lives abundantly.

I feel like I have to mention our reading from 1 Peter, if only because it can be a difficult reading.   Some of you may know that the verses right before our reading today in 1 Peter were used historically to bolster up the what was seen as the correctness of slavery in the US.  1 Peter 2: 18 reads “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.”  First remember that Jesus has never condoned slavery.  Slavery in any form is not good, but slavery in Israel was not the chattel slavery of the US. And lastly, Jesus coming for life in abundance cannot be reconciled with any sort of slavery system. The point of the Epistle is not that suffering in and of itself is good, but the cause of your suffering matters, if one suffers for your faith, you are becoming Christ like, and Christ will sustain you through it.

And thus, 1 Peter teaches us that it is not enough that our lives alone are lived abundantly, no one neither we nor others, should suffer for anything less than the coming of the kingdom. That is the only suffering that has any true merit.

As we go out into the world at the end of this service, we MUST choose to live our lives abundantly. We MUST choose to help others live their lives abundantly. If we don’t, we turn our backs on the salvation offered to us and to all.  There are so many ways that people do not live their lives abundantly— so…we can get counseling, we can help with the poor, the prisoned, the needy, we can spread our riches more equitably whether individually and/ or how we vote and petition our leaders to vote for different laws. Hoarding our abundance helps neither us nor those who do not have enough.

Jesus came so that we may have life and have it abundantly. Of course, we do so, not just by willing it to be so, but by God’s grace, who offers us an abundant life that is at once both a free gift, and costs everything.

*May God help us to live abundantly and help us help others to live abundantly.  Amen.*