

## “The Great Thing about Awe”

A sermon by the Very Rev'd Timothy Jones  
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Acts 2:42-47 / John 10:1-10  
May 7, 2017

The first church I served out of seminary was in  
southwestern Virginia, south of Roanoke near the  
Blue Ridge Mountains.

Our semi-rural community sat outside the little  
town of Rocky Mount.

The church and the house we lived in across from  
the church were surrounded by corn fields and  
dairy farms. Some of my parishioners raised dairy  
cows, some raised chickens,  
a couple had small vegetable farms – “truck  
farms,” as they called them.

Once Jill and I went to hog butchering.

But no one there tended sheep.

In fact, I've never known a sheep farmer,  
Have any of you? Raise your hand if so.

Shepherds aren't very familiar to us,  
And yet there are few names for God  
more pervasive or more powerful in the long story  
of God's people than that of Good Shepherd.

It's become a tradition every  
fourth Sunday of Easter to reflect on  
Jesus as our shepherd. We even name this day  
Good Shepherd Sunday.

But we find ourselves in an interesting place  
with our having little or no first-hand experience  
with shepherds or sheep.

By the way, Merriam-Webster announced it's  
adding a word to its official dictionary: Sheeple.  
The word is a combination of sheep and people.  
Sheeple is an unflattering term to describe "people  
who are docile ... or easily influenced,"  
especially vulnerable to marketers or political  
leaders.

Not a very promising image for us, is it?

And what about shepherds?

How can that picture help us?

Some years ago, the author and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor discovered just before one Good Shepherd Sunday that someone she knew actually grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest.

An actual sheep-herder!

She learned from him a couple of things that helped her and that might help us to reclaim this wonderful title for Jesus.

We who are “the sheep of his hand,”  
as a psalm puts it.

What it might mean not only for us as individuals,  
but as a church, to name Jesus as our shepherd?

First, contrary to popular belief,  
Sheep are not stupid and clueless.  
They are not, as the George Clooney character put  
it in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*,  
“dumber than a bag of hammers.”

According to Brown Taylor's friend, it is the  
"cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading  
that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not  
behave like cows. . . . [C]ows are herded from the  
rear by hooting [cow hands] with cracking whips,  
but that will not work with sheep at all."

Stand behind hind them making loud noises,  
she learned, and all they will do is run around  
behind you, because they prefer to be led.  
"You push cows," [her] friend said, "but you *lead*  
sheep, and they will not go anywhere that  
someone else does not go first—namely,  
their shepherd—who goes ahead of them to show  
them that everything is all right."

To want to wait for a shepherd to guide you  
doesn't strike me as dumb, but prudent.  
And it hints at a surprising perceptiveness.

"It never ceased to amaze" Barbara Brown  
Taylor's friend, growing up with sheep,  
"that he could walk right through a sleeping flock  
without disturbing a single one of them," because

they knew him, while if a stranger stepped foot in  
the fold it caused pandemonium.

Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Preaching Life* (Kindle Locations 1652-1658).

That's how alert they are.

Sensitive, even.

Sheep want to be close to a shepherd.

But not just anyone, not just any shepherd.

They shy away from strangers or false shepherds.

They are not impressed by a mere hired hand.

I'm more struck by something else.

I'm struck by how fond they get of  
their true shepherd. They are not just perceptive.

They become devoted and loyal  
when they perceive a shepherd caring for them.

And now we begin to see why  
this image matters so much to us, to a church.

When a shepherd spends all that time with them,  
they learn to recognize his or her way of walking,

his mannerisms, the clucks and calls.

Especially they learn the shepherd's character.

They come to trust him, to expect his help.

The relationship grows deep. I like that portrait.

For we take comfort from a shepherd who leads us beside still waters, even when we are walking

through a dark valley or when we're scared,

Or in this time of global turmoil and domestic strife, or maybe for you, a time of personal crisis.

A God who is a Good Shepherd inspires in us deep emotion and devotion.

But something else:

I'm struck not only by Jesus' mention of how he is a shepherd, he is also, as he said, the gate.

The gate to sheep fold.

Sheepfolds were patches of ground surrounded by walls but open to the sky, with only one entrance.

A gate. The walls kept the sheep from wandering and protected them from wild animals.

And the gate could be shut once all were inside, and all were safe.

Still, sometimes the sheep had to go out.

With the gate opened, the shepherd could lead his  
flock in search of pasture.

Jesus says he is that gate.

He's the one who can close out the dangers of  
wolves, gathering the flock under his protection.

But then he's one who can open up the fold,  
so that we get drawn and led into the world.

The gate swings open for us to venture out.

But note: It's not only individual sheep here.

It's a *flock* he protects and leads.

The very word flock tells us we are also not  
ruggedly alone. We become part of a gathering.

None of us is self-made and completely self-  
reliant. I mean that not just in the sense of our  
need to be kept and guided by a shepherd-God,  
but also in how we need one another.

Being a follower of Christ is  
not a do-it-yourself project.

It's when people are gathered,

it's when we're brought together,  
that something gets kindled in hearts.

Which leads us to the passage from Acts.  
Did you notice in today's reading the vibrant life  
of that young church?

The sense of God's presence was palpable.  
They felt wonder, awe, vibrancy.

That's possible when church  
becomes more than a mere sheepfold,  
but also a place of encounter—  
A place to meet with God and with one another.

Those early Christians practiced habits  
that fed that vibrancy and life in their life together  
just like we can, and we do.

They paid attention to the Shepherd in their midst,  
first of all. And they met and prayed and shared  
meals – they shared everything.

And then other people, folks outside the fold,  
wanted to be a part of those gatherings, because  
they were life-giving and even electric.

When we learn, “The Lord added daily to their  
number those who were being saved,”  
it comes as the result of the presence of Christ,  
The good shepherd, in their midst.  
And the quality of their shared life together.

They didn’t sit down with a chart or graph  
And say, okay, how do we strategize our growth?  
People kept flocking to the church (excuse the  
pun) because something was happening  
in their midst.

They kept crowding into the sheepfold.  
Something vital was happening in their midst.  
*Someone* was happening.

There were signs and wonders.  
Those who had been baptized devoted themselves  
to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the  
breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone.  
You can’t manufacture that sense of awe.  
But you can come ready for it.

You can come expecting to meet a divine  
Someone who is good, and worthy of trust.  
And you can come expecting to find others  
Who are also eager, prayerful, ready to devote  
themselves to the teachings of the apostles,  
to the Scriptures, to the breaking of bread.

That happens here. And will happen more.  
That's my vision.

I talked about that some last Sunday when I spoke  
of how many meals we serve from our kitchen  
(almost a thousand weekly!).

Dean Sam Candler, Dean of the Cathedral of St.  
Phillip, former dean of Trinity,  
wrote in his parish newsletter something I liked.  
He wrote about Average Sunday Attendance.  
Also known as ASA, for short.

Average Sunday Attendance. It's a way to  
measure how many are coming – a marker.

But Sam acknowledged, as we have here, how in many churches, attendance patterns are shifting.

A regular church goer used to attend four times a month. Now, someone considers him- or herself a regular at one or two times a month. If you are one who still comes every week, bless you! Great.

Sam made a point of saying: Look at the big picture. They are a Cathedral, like us, and like them, our Cathedral is open practically all the time, serving, and learning, seven days a week, often twelve hours a day: Bible studies, altar guild, small groups, Daisies and Brownies, choir rehearsals, committees, grief groups,

Sam concluded, I do not worry so much about “Average Sunday Attendance.” Instead, I work towards “Average Weekly Engagement.”

What do the first letters spell out?

Not “ASA,” but “AWE.”

Of course, I want people to come every Sunday.  
So much happens when that we get into that life-  
giving rhythm.

Worship forms the heart of our life.  
But I want also to remind you to engage the  
church weekly, and think about other days.  
I want us to engage here on weekdays, too.

Keep your ears open and  
your eyes upon the good Shepherd.  
Watch how he leads us as a parish.  
Let's allow him to stir up in us renewed devotion.

How exciting to think of Average Weekly  
Engagement, or even better, Wonder-filled  
Weekly Engagement, *Extraordinary* Weekly  
Engagement, as again awe falls on *us*.