

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“I know my own, and my own know me.” That statement of Jesus in today’s Gospel Reading could be taken in a couple of ways. It could mean that there are some who belong to Jesus, who are in a sense predestined to become his sheep, and others who are likewise predestined to not become his sheep. If he calls them and they come running to him, they’re his sheep. If not they aren’t his sheep. And it’s just a matter of going out and issuing the call so that the world can be sorted. It *could* mean that. But I have a hard time fitting that to the rest of this Gospel or indeed any of the other Gospels, because that’s certainly not how it worked with the original sheep, that first set of disciples. Now, to be sure, those disciples did, remarkably and surprisingly, drop what they were doing to follow him. They left their homes and their families to follow him, which was a big deal. But it took a lot of time, a lot of patience, and a lot of work on Jesus’ part for those first disciples to catch on to who Jesus was and what he was doing. And so I’m inclined to think of Jesus and his sheep as a work in progress.

If you know anything about sheep, you might know that they can be a lot of work. I don’t have a lot of experience with sheep, but I have told you before about my grandfather who kept about six sheep at a time on his acre or so of land in down in southern Illinois, and how they would come running when he called them, but would ignore us kids when we called them. I’m pretty sure that that was not the way it worked between Grandpa and those sheep from day one. I’m fairly confident that they had to get to know him, get used to his voice, and the daily routine of letting them out to pasture and calling them back into the barn in the evening, before it could be said of those sheep that they knew my grandfather. There was some work involved. For farmers who raise large flocks of sheep, who breed them and sell them, there is even more work. I know this only because Helen and I love to watch British farming documentaries that I’ve told you about before. From that I have learned that one of the hardest things about raising sheep is lambing season. And that’s because a significant number of ewes need some help birthing their lambs. Lambs get stuck. They get turned around the wrong way. And then after they’re out, some of them need help getting their first breath. One technique to make that happen is sticking a piece of straw in their nostril to make them sneeze. But getting the lambs born is only half the battle. Some ewes don’t accept their lambs, don’t allow them to suckle. They need encouragement. Sometimes that works, and sometimes it doesn’t. And when it doesn’t, the farmers try to pair up the rejected lambs with ewes whose lambs died while being born, or with ewes who only have one lamb and can easily nurse two. That sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t, and the last resort is to bottle feed rejected lambs until they are able to graze.

I’ve talked you through all of this because I think there is a connection to be made to Jesus the Good Shepherd in today’s Gospel reading. But it’s a connection that is hard to make unless you realized that this tenth chapter of John follows that long story of the man born blind that takes up the entirety of chapter 9. It’s one of those long readings in John’s Gospel that we get once every three years in Lent. Let me refresh your memory. It starts with the disciples asking about whose fault it was that this man was born blind. Was it his parents who sinned? Or had he sinned already before he was born? And Jesus responds “none of the above,” but that this man’s blindness was going to serve to make Jesus known. And so he makes some mud, puts it on the man’s eyes, and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. And the man comes back able to

see. This is still pretty early in the chapter, and then the rest of the chapter is taken up by the Pharisees' investigating the man's healing and disbelieving the man's story about Jesus healing him. Eventually, because they simply cannot accept his account that Jesus has cured his blindness, they drive him out of his community. But Jesus goes looking for him. He's not done with him. The physical healing only took a moment, but Jesus wants more for him. He wants the man to know him for who he is, the "Son of Man," God's agent who has come into the world for human salvation.

With all of this in the background, when we get to chapter ten we're meant to notice that all along Jesus was being the Good Shepherd to this man, caring for a lost and rejected lamb. And this is why I think that when Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me," that this is not a simple matter of sorting of the world into pre-determined sets of good guys and bad guys, but the result of a lot of hard work by a shepherd who is determined to save his sheep even before they are his sheep, and to bring them into his fold. He is like the farmers during lambing season whose whole lives are consumed by looking after the welfare of the sheep. Except even more so. Because even though the farmers we watch make lots of sacrifices to care for their sheep, pulling all-nighters with ewes and lambs at risk, completely giving up their social lives and free time, they do not literally lay down their lives for their sheep. Because for them that would be absurd. Of course it would.

But Jesus is a different story. Jesus is God fully invested in us and our struggle with the powers of sin, death, and evil that rage around us. He is God made flesh, John tells us at the beginning of this Gospel. He *can* lay down his life in order to save us from those powers because he can also take it up again, as he says here in our reading. And now in the thick of the Easter season we recognize and celebrate that that is just what he has done through his death and resurrection. But of course that is not the end of the story. While we his sheep celebrate what he has done for us, we know that a Good Shepherd is never finished shepherding. Sheep are sheep. They always need looking after. There are always sheep who need help, both inside and outside the Christian fold, so the Shepherd continues his work. But now we get to be a part of that work. We get to be the ewes of his flock who nurture lambs who are not our own, lambs who have been rejected or abandoned. We also get to be the Shepherd's voice, for one another and for the world around us, as we gather in this community of Grace around word and sacrament, proclaiming in our worship and fellowship the Good News of God's love for the world, and as we live out that Good News in lives of compassion and service through agencies like Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, like the Grace Food Pantry, and a myriad of other ways we find to care for neighbors near and far.

We participate in the Good Shepherd's ongoing story so that others may also know him as their shepherd and benefit from the care, comfort, and salvation he provides. May we delight in that baptismal calling. May we continue to rely on his help in times of need, and to serve as agents of his help in the world around us, proclaiming with our voices and our lives that Christ is risen! Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)