

Transcript of Bishop Eaton's Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday

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Grace to you and peace from Jesus, our Good Shepherd. Happy Good Shepherd Sunday and happy day before Earth Day. Thank you for this opportunity to read and think and pray about these very rich texts that all talk about and demonstrate the intimate care that God has for God's own creation.

You know, at first I was a little skeptical about how I could work in the good shepherd Sunday and Earth Day all at once. And I remember when I was in high school I was part of the All-Ohio youth orchestra and I got to know sheep. You see, I'm a city girl and I'd never really been close to sheep other than those made with cotton balls and pipe cleaners. But our barracks were downwind of the sheep barn at the Ohio State Fair where we performed, and I had a very earthy experience with the sheep.

Nevertheless in all of the readings today, not just the Psalm— Psalm 23 so beloved-- nor just the passage from John, where Jesus declares that he is the Good Shepherd and that his own hear his voice-- the other passages as well we hear about God's tender care particularly and intimately involved with creation.

Very often it seems to me in western Christianity, and also in western philosophical thought, there is a sense that is which is of the earth-- that which is material-- is somehow inferior to that which is considered to be spiritual. And there is a great gulf between the material and the spiritual in a lot of western thought, in western philosophy. And I think it creeps into as well our own spirituality. And that's just not the case.

We believe and celebrate that the beginning of Easter started, in fact, at Christmas with the incarnation, where God took a human form. Where God took on the form of Jesus, was incarnate, took on human flesh, and became in his earthly life the earth creature. Just does Adam and Eve and all of us were created from the dust of the earth, from dirt itself, from soil so Jesus has taken on this material nature. And we believe and confess that even in the resurrection, Jesus is fully human and fully divine.

We make a mistake and we miss a lot I think when we try to walk away from our own creatureliness, when we try to somehow escape this world that we're in and are not able

to recognize that God still cares about and is still creating this place, this earth, this cosmos, all of it. And that human creatures are just one part of the creation. And we have been called to tend this garden that God has given to us and so when we disavow somehow our own creatureliness, I think we set ourselves off and apart from God. Luther put it this way: his understanding of God's presence in all of creation. Luther said that God's entire divine nature is holy and entirely in all creatures, more deeply, more inwardly more present than the creature is to itself. Somehow seeing ourselves as separate also sets us up against God and I would contend that our rebellion against or our push back against our own createdness, the beauty of that creation, the limits of that creatureliness, causes a lot of damage to the rest of creation and to ourselves.

In the Gospel stories we have two accounts of women who anoint Jesus with pure nard. They came to anoint Jesus' earthly body just before his crucifixion and Jesus praised these women for doing that. And nard, as it turns out, is an extremely rare and pungent perfume, greatly prized in Jesus' day and still today. And the description of the aroma of nard is not one of flowers but one of earthiness, of hummus almost, like soil of the earth. We hear in the story of Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus that the fragrance filled the whole room and was probably so powerful that even on the cross and in the tomb, the body of Jesus still had the fragrance of the earth.

It is to this good and beautiful creation that God has sent the Good Shepherd to tend the sheep, to take care of our creatureliness, because that too is holy, and because of the incarnation of God with us in the flesh, all of our lives-- that which is created, that which is temporal-- is also holy. In the 23rd Psalm, which we probably all know by heart, hear about the Lord as shepherd, tending this flock, bringing them to verdant pastures, taking care of these earthly needs, for food, for water, for sustenance, for peace, wholeness. This is the promise of how God shows up for humankind and for all of creation of which we are a part. The Good Shepherd cares for our earthly lives.

In the gospel according to John, which we just heard, we hear of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Sometimes people think when Christians talk about these things, particularly in the face of the climate crisis that we're in right now, about the danger and the harm that we have caused to the climate, that all of this imagery about Jesus being a Good Shepherd is somehow just pie the sky, pollyannish, wishful thinking that doesn't come to grips with the actual danger which we face, the harm we have caused, and the harm that's being caused to us.

But if you think again about the story of John, about Jesus saying he's the Good Shepherd, it doesn't shy away at all from the actual dangers and perils of this world. We hear about hirelings who are willing to flee rather than lay down their lives in order to

protect the charge they have been given, but the Good Shepherd doesn't do that. We hear about wolves who come to snatch and to scatter, but that does not happen because the Good Shepherd protects the flock. We hear about other flocks and the Good Shepherd says those are not excluded because all will become part of this one flock.

In all of these stories, all of these passages that we hear on Good Shepherd Sunday, we hear about a real flesh and blood, with us God, a God who does not stay off at a distance as Bette Midler made in her hit in the 90s. But a God who has come near to us, a God who is better understood and more truly seen as we take a look at all of creation and find your place in it. A God who does not wish us to be walking dead or those who are agents of death but instead has called us to be agents of this living God, who cares for all of creation.

We also believe and confess not to let ourselves off the hook or not to say that we have nothing to do with working toward the care of creation. But in order to bring hope, if not optimism, at least hope, that God is still creating, that God still present in all creation, and that God will bring all of creation to fruition. We hope and pray as we hear these stories of a God right near us, a God who is our Good Shepherd, a God who tends to the physical as well as a spiritual need of this flock, that we can be agents of such a God, who brings life and reconciliation for all of the creation, not just for the human part of that creation.

This is actually, I think, what we are being called to do. Very often I think people become almost hopeless when we hear about the severity of climate change, and it has been quite a year when natural disaster after natural disaster has caused fires and flooding and tornadoes and hurricanes, and when we begin to see our place in making those natural disasters even more deadly and acute and we can lose hope. But God will never give up on God's creation and what the world needs to hear from God's people, from God's church, that we are called to tend and steward this good garden and that this trail of mercy and justice, this trail of goodness and mercy for all, this abundant life, which is the verse just before the gospel story for today, is something that God means for all of creation. And that we are a part of that. We are called to be agents of life as we follow our Good Shepherd. Amen.