

“Wolf and Shepherd”
A Homily by Stephen Martz for the People of St. Nicholas
3 May 2009
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Acts 4:5-12 + Psalm 23 + 1 John 3:16-24 + John 10:11-18

Can I tell you a secret? It’s something I’ve never told anyone at St. Nicholas.

When I was a little boy, my favorite fairy tales were: “Little Red Riding Hood,” “The Three Little Pigs,” and “Hansel and Gretel.”

If you remember those tales, you know two of them have a big bad wolf as the villain, and the other one has a mean old....

Let’s think about the wolf. I wonder what it’s like to be a wolf..... And I wonder what it’s like when a wolf wants to eat you up.....

In today’s story, the wolf is scary because the wolf attacks and hurts the sheep – gobbles them up if she gets a chance.

Can you think of times when someone has hurt you? Maybe hurt your feelings, or scared you, or something else. How did you feel?

Maybe that’s how the sheep felt. Even though there was someone there to guard them, to protect them from the wolf. Jesus tells us that person was a hired hand.

The hired hand did not know the sheep very well. It was a job. The hired hand did the job for pay, but didn’t really care about the sheep.

The hired hand did not do a very good job. When the wolf came, the hired hand went. He was scared the wolf might eat him. He didn't love the sheep enough to risk his life to protect theirs. So he didn't stay. He would not defend them. He was not a very good shepherd.

I wonder how the sheep felt when they were with the hired hand.....

[At 9 a.m. liturgy -- Not very safe. Not very secure.]

Jesus is different. The sheep feel safe, secure when he is with them. They know his voice. They know he will care for them and protect them from the wolf. He loves them, calls them each by name, finds them if they get lost.

I wonder how it feels to be loved that much.....

It's good to be loved by the Good Shepherd. Good to know the wolf may huff and puff, but can't harm me. Good to be with Jesus. Good to feel his love.

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Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Is he the only good shepherd, or can there be other? Can you, can I, be a good shepherd? Yes, we can! The world is full of good shepherds.

This afternoon, some of us are going to watch a movie. It's a movie about a shepherd named Harvey Milk. *Now -- you may thinking -- Martz has finally gone loco. Harvey Milk wasn't a shepherd. He owned a camera store in San Francisco, and then he became a politician. Besides, there are no sheep in the movie, and Milk doesn't wear a tunic.*

True. But Harvey Milk was a shepherd. A good shepherd. Shepherds, we know from biblical tradition, lead us, guide us, give us courage, carry us home.

They are merciful and compassionate toward their sheep, and they are tough and formidable toward any wolf who comes along.

Harvey Milk was a good shepherd of gay people. We see this from the first frames of the movie, in the images of gay men being arrested in gay bars – what few there were -- simply for being gay. Such arrests routinely occurred in every major U.S. city – usually because the bar’s owner had not paid off the police.

Look carefully at the men in the opening scene. They look scared, broken, ashamed. They are lost sheep. Sheep without a shepherd. Without hope. Those are the men – and later women – Milk came to shepherd.

Our time is so different that it’s hard for us to imagine the furtive, desperate, and hidden lives that almost all gay people in the United States led well into the 1960s and even the 1970s. What a difference 40 years makes!

In the *public* realm, the good shepherd acts in *political* ways to safeguard the sheep, even if it means laying down his or her own life. Milk laid down his life, and he is an inspiration and hero to many. *You’ve got to give them hope*, Harvey said, as he stood firmly and fought fiercely to protect his sheep.

Our Eucharistic prayer today extends that commitment, when it calls us to become a people of hope...justice...and love. These are the deep values of a well lived life, and Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls us to incarnate them in the world.

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To that call I would add that to become a people of hope, justice, and love in the world we need an inner good shepherd, too. Because we all have an inner wolf. That's why "The Three Little Pigs," "Little Red Riding Hood," and "Hansel and Gretel" are such timeless tales.

Without the good shepherd, or its equivalent, the wolves and witches of our psyches will gobble us up and fill us with despair, injustice, and hate.

The early Christians knew this. The good shepherd was far and away the preferred image of Jesus in early Christian art. The first Christians knew, as the analyst Edward Edinger puts it, that the good shepherd is an "integrative, consolidating" image that appears at times of fragmentation and scattering.

Times have changed a lot since then, but the human struggle and the human psyche have not. Today, as surely as in the centuries after Jesus, we know what it is to fall apart, to feel the center cannot hold. We know what it is to feel lost; indeed, to be lost. Every human soul encounters witches and wolves, which take many different forms.

Yet the good shepherd -- the church's great image of hope, justice, and love -- is also alive in our souls and in our world. In our souls, the good shepherd gathers us into his or her arms, carries us home to ourselves, to God.

And in the world, shepherds such as Gandhi, King, Milk; Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and more inspire us to seek hope, and turn away from despair; to pursue justice instead of practicing genocide, torture, or ethnic cleansing; to follow love, rather than wallowing in anger or hate.

Can I tell you something else I haven't shared before? When I was a teenager and young adult, the person who inspired me the most – the first person, really, who showed me what it was to be a good shepherd -- was Robert Kennedy.

And I remember in 1966, at the height of apartheid, he went to South Africa and gave a speech that inspires me to this day. I end by quoting a small part of it:

Few will have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of the events...It is from numberless diverse acts of courage such as these that human history is thus shaped.

Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he [or she] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Perhaps the most important thing a good shepherd does is send forth tiny ripples of hope. You've got to give them hope. When enough of us truly believe that, imagine how safe, how secure all the sheep will feel.