

Sermon Preached May 3, 2009
Year B, Easter 4
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Do you know the story of the "Three Little Pigs? You have probably heard about "Little Red Riding Hood," "Peter and the Wolf," and "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," but did you know that Jesus once told a story about a big, bad wolf?

In the story that Jesus told, there are sheep and the wolf wants to get them. And in this story Jesus is the good shepherd and we are the sheep. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus said. "The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep..."

Sheep live for 20-25 years and in the Mid East they are raised for their wool, not their meat. Therefore a shepherd knows his sheep for many years. They would build up a relationship. The shepherd would groom them and keep them safe. He would rescue them, feed them, guide them, and protect them.

In the United States we often use aircraft to herd our sheep, we use metal gates to guide them to be vaccinated and processed. We have tags in their ears so that when they are at the process factory they can be separated by lots and ownership. Sounds a bit like a hired hand. Someone is hired to do some work, but no relationship is developed.

In the Mid East the flocks of various shepherds sleep together for protection and in the morning, when the shepherds go off in different directions, their sheep separate and follow their respective shepherd. They know their shepherd and his voice. There is a long term committed relationship between sheep and shepherd.

The shepherd doesn't insist the sheep be good, or even particularly smart. Which is good, because sheep aren't smart. Shepherds love their sheep unconditionally. This is great news for us. As God's sheep, we don't have to prove ourselves to God. We don't have to be worthy. We are God's sheep and are loved and protected no matter what.

And the good shepherd cares for the sheep. Has a relationship with the sheep. He protects them from the big bad wolf. For us the wolf is whatever is evil and scares us. **What things scare you?** These are our wolves.

Perhaps the things which scare you might be swine flu, or loosing your job, or having addictions, or rocky relationships, recession, pollution, war, crime, or lots of other things. We all have wolves at our doorstep. Jesus will protect us from them.

Sometimes we put our trust in good shepherds, like Captain Richard Phillips who offered his life for the safety of his crew from Somali pirates.

Sometimes we put our trust in hired hands. People who don't care for us. Who leave us to the wolves. People like Richard Madoff who stole billions of dollars from investors.

Jesus says, "The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away-- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my

sheep know me -- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I will lay down my life for my sheep.”

Jesus is the good shepherd and we are his sheep. We all are scared by some things. We all are confronted by evil. And while there are those we can trust, there are good shepherds out there, only Jesus is there for us all the time. Only Jesus loves us unconditionally despite our failings. We don't have to be good to be loved.

Jesus knows his sheep and he loves us. He will protect us when evil tries to harm us. When we put our trust in the good shepherd, we can say, “Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?”

Amen.