

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, APRIL 22, 2018,
AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A guy who was tired with life in the big city decided to take a vacation and go to the mountain, so he rented a chalet in the wilderness. One day, as he was strolling, he got to the edge of a precipice. He carefully looked down and backed quickly, amazed: "gee, is this deep!" He took a pebble and threw it in, to see how long it took until it reached bottom. It took a while, so he thought "that's really deep"; then he found a big stone and tossed it, and when it hit the ground with an almost inaudible sound he reckoned "this is what I call deep". Having nothing else to do, he started to look around and found a large piece of rail. He strained a while, as it was pretty heavy, rusted and muddy, but he managed to push it over the cliff, and after some time, when he heard it hitting the ground with a big blast, he reasoned: "now that's something!"

He had just seated himself to rest and start meditating at the abyssal dimensions, when he saw a goat, bulging-eyed, heading at maximum speed directly to the bottomless pit. There was nothing he could do, in no time the goat got on the edge and jumped. The man was dazzled, "flying goat, who would have thought of that"; he was still under the strong impression of the goat's magical abilities when a shepherd came by.

"Howdy there, did you happen to see a goat?" the shepherd asked. "Don't ask me" excitedly answered the man, "you've never seen anything like that in your life: a goat just came in galloping and jumped over the cliff with no hesitation".

The shepherd couldn't believe his ears; even more stunned than the man, all he could say was "How was this possible, I'm asking you, how in the world was this possible? I had tethered it to a large piece of rail!"ⁱ

Shepherds have treacherous and dangerous jobs, not the least of which is keeping track of errant goats and sheep that have wandered away from the flock. Today's gospel reading from *John* takes the time to elucidate how people viewed Jesus in his day, as well as the way he wished to present himself. I've always found this to be a strange gospel text coming as it does not long after the call of the disciples, who we know were mostly fisherman (Matthew perhaps as the tax collector being the lone exception). One might expect Jesus to say "I am the Great Angler," which he does, in effect, making them the promise that he will make them fishers of men. The Good Shepherd angle (no pun intended) is part of the "I Am" sayings in *John* in response, one supposes, to the question that Jesus asks Peter, "Who do folks say that I am?" He claims to be many things: the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate, the good shepherd; the resurrection and life; the way the, the truth and the life; and the true vine, where the I AM portion of his claim links him to the declaration by God to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM; tell the people when they ask you who sent you that I AM

sent you!” The idea that Jesus is the good shepherd also links him to ancient stories of Israel, using the metaphor of Jesus as the great gatherer, and Israel, like we, goats and sheep.

In this gospel, unlike other places in the bible, or perhaps in our own experience of farm work, sheep and goats have a positive image. “Sheep signified the communal life of the people, constituted a source of food and clothing, and functioned as the primary sacrificial gifts to God. The single wandering lamb from *Luke’s* parable of the lost sheep is not what is presented in this gospel, nor does the Bible describe sheep as being dirty; nor is a barefooted white-robed man a realistic depiction of the shepherd, who by the first century was thought of as lower class and religiously unclean.ⁱⁱ” What we end up with is a model king shepherd, like David, which is why Jesus is often referred to as the son of David, in addition to having been descended from the complex patriarch of Israel.

I’m just not sure that *WE* ever caught on to the notion that *WE* are to be the sheep and goats in this tale, which is most likely why we have, both metaphorically speaking and in actuality, so many challenges in life. We tend to make our lives more complicated than needs be, when we have been gifted with an easier model. This is the area where psychotherapists make their money trying to aid us unravel just what is to be our role in life. I doubt that few of us have ever checked off the sheep/goat option, despite its appeal, because we’ve not gotten beyond believing that we alone are in charge, or need to be. Think of all those self-help books that have been written since the 1990’s, imploring that we get a handle on our lives and showing us how to do it. I can’t think of any of those books that mention sheep and goats as a goal, though there is probably a lot to explore should one want to.

Plus we have to contend with the text of *Matthew 25* that separates the two groups, giving the sheep the greater glory, and asking “who wants to be a goat anyway” while at the same time implying that most of us are, whether we realize it or not.

But let us get back to the idea that we might not be solely in charge of our lives, and that there is a greater power who can, does, will make all things right. Certainly this is the God we pray to on a habitual basis, the God of our liturgy, the God of our Lord’s Prayer, the God of our Communion. If we don’t believe that this God is the One In Charge then I’m not sure I understand why we are occupying these seats this morning. It is by all claims the God of Scripture and song, so we’ve covered all bases when we address this Deity on Sundays. Finally, it is this Creator God who is in charge and to whom we commit all our beliefs, in conjunction with the Holy Field of Science, about how the universe operates and how Nature has evolved over millions of millennia.

I’m reminded of a time when I was a young minister starting out as an assistant in a large congregation in downtown Yonkers, New York. We had a farmer’s market in our church parking lot that was very busy, and there was no room for anyone to park in the lot, other than disabled folks who had a visible handicapped permit. One Saturday a very officious

woman drove in, threw her car into park, and got out of it, heading for the market. She had no permit, which I was quick to point out to her, so I told her to move. "I'm only going to be about 10 minutes," she scoffed, and continued walking. I got in her way and told her she needed to move the car. She stared at me for a moment then pushed by me. "Who's in charge here? I want to see the person in charge!" "I am," I calmly told her. She looked me up and down, dressed as I was for the summer in cut-off pants and a tee shirt (ah, what we could wear in our younger years...), and said, "No, I mean, who's in charge?" defiantly crossing her arms. I told her once again, perhaps a bit more emphatically, "I am." She said, "There must be someone over you," to which I replied, "only God, now move your car!" (She did, grumbling something under her breath that I cannot repeat to you in public.) Though one can only tell the story once, and have it take its full effect, the emphasis is clear. When it comes down to it, there is, ultimately, One - in - Charge, and it is not us. That's why they say there are no atheists on a sinking ship. In the many visits I've made to a hospital bed over the years, I've seen previously religiously unattached folks utter words to God that they did not know where in them. Either that or the sentiments were so far repressed into their psyche they had forgotten how to call them forth into their present situation.

Just how do we know God is in control in our lives, how can we believe such? Have you seen those bumper stickers "Relax – God's in charge!" I have. I just don't want to have to put it to the test (that's where the "lead us not into temptation" part of the Lord's Prayer comes in; it's where we ask God to please not put us to the test to see if God still cares for us during the rough times. Despite the assurances from the psalmist of "God is our help and our strength, a very present help in our trouble..." we are afraid we will not be comforted). How does God comfort us in our afflictions? One, God sent a portion of self, whom we call The Son of God, to experience all that we do in our travails in life, to say to us "I understand because I've been there." Two, God sends angels to us on a daily basis who make our life easier. They may not look or particularly act holy, but their work is divine, heavenly even, you might say. I think of my friend Barbara who sat holding her husband's hand as he died of cancer. "If only I could have done more; if only we had had more time. I was hoping for a miracle." I remember feeling then and telling her, after all she had given to him, that she was the miracle! She was all he needed and he was given that gift by her but also by a loving God who gave the strength and the stamina and a wonderfully spiritual loving kindness to her. She was the embodiment of the 70's singer Jack Wagner's song, "All I Need."ⁱⁱⁱ

For you see, God, in partnership with us, is what we need, what the world needs. For those who are students of spiritual teachings, you have probably come across the powerful Hopi prophecy "We are the ones we've been waiting for."^{iv} Here's the complete transmission:

"You have been telling people that this is the Eleventh Hour, now you must go back and tell the people that this is the Hour. And there are things to be considered..."

Where are you living?

What are you doing?

What are your relationships?

Are you in right relation?
Where is your water?

Know your garden.
It is time to speak your truth.
Create your community.
Be good to each other.
And do not look outside yourself for your leader.

Then he clasped his hands together, smiled, and said, “This could be a good time! There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are being torn apart and will suffer greatly. Know the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.

And I say, see who is in there with you and celebrate. At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt.

The time of the one wolf is over. Gather yourselves! Banish the word ‘struggle’ from your attitude and your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”^v

God, you, me, believer, atheist, I am, You are, the wolves gathered - - if we are the sheep and goats and God is in command, so too are we, in concert, in control, and we need to make our stand. God calls, we response – together we act. We have a mission to make things well with our surroundings, or as Wordsworth says, “The world is too much with us.”^{vi} Now is the time to be awake, aware, constant in our work, and faithful in our love. As the Lutheran pastor Jaroslav Jan Vajda wrote in his now famous introit hymn,

**Now the silence, now the peace,
Now the empty hands uplifted;
Now the kneeling, now the plea,
Now the Father’s arms in welcome;
Now the hearing, now the power,
Now the vessel brimmed for pouring;
Now the body, now the blood,
Now the joyful celebration;
Now the wedding, now the songs,
Now the heart forgiven, leaping;**

**Now the Spirit's visitation,
Now the Son's epiphany;
Now the Father's blessing,
Now, now, now.^{vii}**

Amen.

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ⁱ <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Shepherd#ixzz5CsnEnUA7>

ⁱⁱ Sundays and Seasons, p. 169

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/all-i-need-lyrics-jack-wagner.html>

^{iv} Hopi Elder's Prophecy, June 8, 2000

^v <http://thesyncmovie.com/2014/01/we-are-the-one-weve-been-waiting-for-part-1/>

^{vi} <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45564/the-world-is-too-much-with-us>

^{vii} "Now," by the Lutheran Pastor Jaroslav Jan Vajda, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/n/o/nowthsil.htm>