

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2021; Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud
Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18; Psalm 23

A few decades ago, I attended an all-day workshop on Christian Formation for teachers, parents, and kids. I went with a friend, and we took some of our kids with us. I can't remember too much of it, except that one presenter talked to us about the story that I just read. She told us that studies suggested that the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd was one that most little children recognized and gravitated toward. And I thought of the little plaque of the Good Shepherd that had been on my bedroom wall throughout my childhood—and was at that moment on the wall of my daughter's bedroom.

The interesting thing, the presenter went on to explain, was the way that little children could identify themselves with the little sheep on Jesus' shoulder, whether they were living in the city or the country—or ever even saw a sheep—most kids (at least most kids 30 years ago) easily see themselves as the little lamb.

It is a very sweet image (unless you find yourself downwind of the sheep on a hot day) but the truth is that I wonder about this image for those of us who have outgrown childish things. Are we really all children? Is our relationship with Jesus one of parent and child? Doesn't that remove our call to do the work that God gives us to do?

Of course, this image of Jesus the Good Shepherd is only one of many images that Jesus gives us to help us understand how we may make a relationship with God. In the 15th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus will talk about us as friends. But for today, this is the figure that the church uses to help us know who God is and who we are. Jesus is a strong protector, finding us when we are lost, carrying us when we are weary, caring for us when we are too little, or weak, or stupid to care for ourselves. It is not always a flattering image, at least to my human sense of self.

I like to read magazines or novels or easy biographies before I fall asleep each night. Early last week, looking for something new to read, I happened upon a book that has been on my shelves for decades.

*Sweet Promised Land*¹ was written by Robert Laxalt the year that I was born. I am guessing that I got it from my mother's shelf, because it turns out that my parents knew the author—his son and my brother were a year apart in the same high school. And his older brother was the governor of our state! For all the familiarity of the outside of the book, and at least a memory of the family connection to the author, I had never even opened it until a couple of nights ago. I guess I was expecting a little history of the state of Nevada, where I had lived as a child.

But in fact, *Sweet Promised Land* is the story of a good shepherd, a man who loved and cared for sheep for most of his long life. Robert Laxalt's father Dominique was taught to care for sheep as a little boy in the Basque Pyrenees, that mountainous section that straddles the border of France and Spain. The Basque people have lived largely in that section of the world for centuries, preserving their own language and culture.

At the beginning of the 20th century, young Basques were leaving the hill country to find their fortunes. Some moved to French or Spanish cities, where they were discriminated against because of their mostly dark looks, their different language, and their lack of

¹ *Sweet Promised Land* by Robert Laxalt, The Curtis Publishing Company, 1957.

education. Others, like Dominique, saved their money and sailed to America, hoping to avoid discrimination and make their fortune.

Dominique ended up in central Nevada, and got work on sheep ranches, where he met and married another Basque immigrant, Theresa, who had trained at the Cordon Bleu, the great cooking academy in France. They worked for large sheep operations, working hard and having children. Dominique would be away for weeks at a time, tending the flock, while Theresa cooked for all of the employees and gave birth to six children. But Laxalt was also acquiring his own sheep and property and making some risky business decisions. By the early 1920's, the Laxalts were a prosperous family headed for disaster. Soon, all of the property that Dominique had amassed was lost when banks began to call loans.

Dominique remembered, "When it was all over, all that my partners and I could keep was one band of a few thousand sheep." (p. 211). And so, it was back up into the hills. Robert Laxalt writes, "After that, I think our family spent half of its growing-up life looking for my father." He describes one incident when his teen-aged brother John was driving in supplies for his father and the sheep. He reports, "[O]ne day, when the sheep were in the foothills and somewhat hidden by the high sagebrush, John drove right past everything—the bend in the road, the sheep, and the camp. My father, who was resting on his canvas bed after lunch, saw him pass." Laxalt goes on to describe a grueling eight-day search, ending with "my father never said an irritated word to John, even though he had been living on bread crusts and goat's milk for three days, and when his burro had run away with his bed, had spent one rainy night in a hollow log." (pp. 21-26)

It isn't just that being a shepherd is hard work. It is lonely work, dangerous work. Not many choose it. Laxalt describes the day that he saw his father stare down a mountain lion which had been killing his lambs. This was in the second chapter, and it was about then that I realized that if Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then his work of caring for us is more than just carrying us on his shoulders when we are cute little children.

A good shepherd has many ways to *lay down his life for the sheep*. After 47 years in the barren Nevada mountains, Dominique had a medical episode of some kind that he related to his family when he came in after a couple of months away. It sounded to his now college-educated children that he had a stroke. Grateful that he seemed fully recovered, they planned a trip for him to return to his home in the French mountains, to visit his surviving family—something that he had always said he wanted to do. Theresa decided not to go—she had been an American for too long—the vast Nevada desert and small hotel she ran in Carson City were home to her.

Robert accompanied his father back to the Basque country. The book is filled with warm and moving anecdotes, but what struck me most was this one, toward the end of the stories, just a day or two before Dominique decides that his vacation is over. He had thought he was coming home, but now he wanted to return to his real home. He tells a nephew about the trouble that could rise up among shepherds and cattle ranchers:

[Dominique started,] "It was all open land, hundreds of miles of it in that corner of Nevada, and by the law you were free to graze your stock in any part of it."

"But if there were that much free land, which I must confess to you Uncle, I find hard to realize," said [the nephew], "I cannot understand why there was trouble."

"Well, the country's not like here," said [Dominique] raising his hands a little helplessly, "where land is so rich you don't ever have to worry about

enough feed. There it was nearly all desert land with sagebrush and a few wild grasses, and where the feed and water were good were the places that the sheepmen and the cattlemen fought about.” (p. 177)

I was a small child in Nevada, and the high desert landscape that Laxalt describes is very familiar to me. And yet, even as a suburban kid, I was really happy to leave Nevada and return to the softer, greener landscape of the East Coast. I was surprised, visiting the Holy Land a few years ago, to find that where Jesus lived was for more like the high desert of Nevada than New England, or the Pyrenees, or the English Cotswolds—those places that inform so many of the romantic backdrops of images of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, where we see sweet, green grass, and gentle flowing brooks. Maybe there is danger as threatening as the wolf that Jesus mentions—but even the wolf in my imagination is more like the one from *Red Riding Hood* than the mountain lion that Dominique Laxalt stared down while his son watched.

Shepherds work in **all** sorts and conditions. Some conditions are easier than others—but wherever it is that you lay down your life for the sheep becomes your home. Jesus the Good Shepherd is God, making a home with us, whether we live near soft, sweet grass, or tough, dry sagebrush. The Good Shepherd lays down their life for the sheep—but don’t make the mistake of thinking that this is just an image for little children, or merely a metaphor for faithful hard work. Sometimes it is literal—human beings living lives that can lead to armed confrontations, or meeting murderous risks, or facing starvation or medical crisis in isolation. Wow. If that sounds to you like our current human condition, I don’t think it is a coincidence. This image from Holy Scripture speaks directly to our present lives.

We have spent a lot of the last thirteen months taking a pause—a period of languishing, according to a recent New York Times² article. The pandemic has been unpredictable, the upheaval of racial discord took some of us by surprise even though it is 400 years old, the terror of gun violence continues, and Earth Day last last week reminded us that our lack of care for the world in which we live is killing our environment. And here we are today, called to reflect upon what for so many of us has been a child’s understanding of God. Where is the Good News in that?

Here is the thing. While we can learn from the past, we cannot live in the past. Dominique wasn’t a shepherd in the abundant Pyrenees; his life was to be a good shepherd in the hard and cold foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

Jesus tells us that he is the Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for us—for each and every one of us. Knowing who shepherds are and what makes them good reminds us again of our God, who becomes one of us to show us exactly how much we are loved—and to let us know that God knows how much good work there is for every human being. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but we are not sheep. That is where the metaphor ends. We belong to God, and we are called to follow the Good Shepherd and lay down our lives for the good of God’s people.

² “There’s a Name for the Blah You’re Feeling: It’s Called Languishing” by Adam Grant in *The New York Times*, April 27, 2021