

Easter 4 April 21, 2024 “Good Shepherd Sunday”

As you may remember from last Sunday, I was still gushing about the tremendous, other worldly experience of the solar eclipse. Then later this week, I was at Westview Meadows, doing the monthly service of Holy Communion there, and of course, we ended up chatting a little about the eclipse before the service. I mentioned that now I really want to go see another one, and Alban Richey said, “Well, you know, that was the second solar eclipse for me; I saw the one in New Hampshire when I was eight years old.” (That was 1932, by the way, for those of you keeping score at home). I was floored! Now I really know Good Shepherd is a special place: we have a member in our midst who has seen the two eclipses in this area during his lifetime. All I can say to that is, “Amen! Alleluia!”

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, we hear the word you bring us today that Jesus is our shepherd; may we hear his voice and follow where he leads with open souls and an abundance of grace; this we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend.
Amen.

Today is of course a special day for us in this special place: Good Shepherd Sunday, when we celebrate our identity as those

called by the good shepherd to be shepherds in this community. Most fittingly, in a few moments, we will bring another child to the waters of new birth, celebrating her life and giving God thanks for the life of her family in this act of grace. Rylin, along with her sister Olivia, her mother and father, Chelsea and Jonathan and her aunt Kila and uncle Jacob who are her sponsors will promise that she too will start to walk along the way of love this shepherd teaches us. One of the things I always do just before baptizing a child (or an adult for that matter) is to say, "Name this child." Part of it is a very practical thing, to make sure I baptize the child with the appropriate name. But there's a deep meaning: this is God's child, and God knows her name. In both the wonderful prayer appointed for this Good Shepherd Sunday, and in the gospel lesson from John, we are told that Jesus, the good shepherd knows us each by name. As the shepherd, Jesus calls each one of us, you and me, and yes, little Rylin here, calls us by name into the fullness of his love. As John's gospel says, the shepherd knows the sheep and cares for them. And I recall once again the sermon Canon Walter Brownridge preached here not so long ago, in which he recounted that he also calls those to be baptized "Beloved." Just as Jesus is proclaimed as the Beloved of God at his baptism by John in the

waters of the River Jordan, so we too, baptized into that same baptism are “Beloved” as well, beloved by God, beloved by our family and loved ones, beloved by our community. May Beloved Rylin this day grow in that love, be fed, nourish and strengthened in that love and may she share that love freely with others in the years ahead.

I believe that this baptism we will celebrate in a few minutes, with its emphasis on God’s love bestowed on us so generously in Christ Jesus, I believe this also gives us a deeper insight into our celebration of “Good Shepherd Sunday” this morning. Of course, a century ago, these green hills of Vermont were covered with sheep. The woods were cleared off, the stones piled into field walls, and scores and scores of sheep were raised here. I can’t remember the exact figure, but I recall hearing that there were some two million or so sheep here, far outnumbering the human inhabitants. Later, of course, closer to our times, the dairy farms took over, but prior to that, it was sheep, sheep and more sheep. Well, sheep are a little few and far between nowadays in these parts, so most of us don’t have much familiarity with them. We tend to think of them as kind of cute, but fundamentally stupid creatures. And that gives rise to a bit of a dilemma: if Jesus is the good shepherd, are we simply

sheep? That's where the metaphor sheers off for me. I believe we are called to be shepherds as well: to follow where Jesus leads us in love not simply as sheep, but as those who will serve as shepherds in his stead. As we heard in the first letter of John, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." This is the call from the good shepherd to you and me, and even to little Rylin here. Our shepherding is in action, following the truth of God's word to care for our community. Our mission statement for the Church of the Good Shepherd is a great statement of this value, "We are gathered by God through Jesus Christ to witness to the presence of God in our lives, to teach and to learn the Good News of Jesus Christ and to care for others in and outside of this church." I am pleased to say on this "Good Shepherd Sunday" that we are carrying out God's mission as the church gathered in the name of Christ here and for our city of Barre.

It is always crucial to remember above all, that we are shepherds because we have a good shepherd. As Christ has loved us so deeply and fully, we are strengthened day by day to love in his name. As the epistle begins this morning, we know this love because Jesus has laid down his life for us, and though this we

can love one another as Jesus commands us. As we have worked and will continue to work to recover in Barre from the floods that took a toll on so many of our neighbors, as we seek to care for our neighbors undergoing a crisis in their housing, as we feed those in need, serve the least among us, continue faithfully in prayer, all this attests to the love and amazing grace that God blesses us with always. It is when we re together doing this shepherding work, that we feel the truth of those concluding words of the epistle, “by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit he has given us.”

Now, on this glorious “Good Shepherd Sunday,” now as we prepare to join with Rylin as we renew our Baptismal covenant , we come to the waters of baptism and follow that by gathering together at this Altar, this day with a special hope on our lips, written by a shepherd in Israel almost three thousand years ago, as David wrote, “Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” Thanks be to God for this amazing grace and thanks be to Christ, the good shepherd to lead us in the way of love. Amen.