

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2023
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

This is the fourth Sunday of Easter – Good Shepherd Sunday.
Shepherds ... Sheep ... Pastures ... Pathways.

All rural, agricultural terms for living life to the full:
caring and cared for. It's all about our connection with creation.
My family have always been connected to the land
– Pappa's Farm, as we knew it,
a quarter section of land in Southern Indiana
east of Bedford just the other side of Heltonville.
Nine generations were born and died there,
and most of them are buried in Fairview Cemetery
about two miles the other side of old U.S. 50.

My mother grew up during the Great Depression.
They were spared much of the hardship. They lived on the Farm.

My grandfather tried keeping sheep once.
After the Spring lambing, my mother and her sister named the lambs. They became like pets,
which meant one day while they were at school
the sheep and lambs disappeared without explanation.
and a puppy appeared in their place.

My grandfather was a good man, but he wasn't a shepherd.
I've always wondered what does it mean to be a good shepherd?
I can understand what a shepherd does for the sheep
– protection from predators,
and being guided, pushed and cajoled
from pasture to greener pasture.

But what would that mean to shepherd people?
People don't just graze. They tend to object, argue,
and tend toward contrariness.
So just who would be the Good Shepherd?

I spent much time the past couple of weeks preparing this homily
thinking in terms of how to describe God and Christ

as the Good Shepherd.

As the “sheep” of Christ, I asked myself:
“how are we directed to where God would have us go in our lives?
Are we pushed and shoved or coddled and cajoled?”

All this was milling around in my head,
as I watched *The Return of the King*
the third in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.
It was advertised as the 20th anniversary of the movie.

I remember the first time I saw it.
Back in December 2003, I was preparing the finals in seminary,
my study group and I crammed for the week before,
then the day before the tests,
we binged on the first two DVDs,
The Fellowship of the Ring and *The Two Towers*,
and then went to the IMAX theater to see the finale.
It was awesome.
And we all aced our finals.

Looking back through the lens of the past 20 years of ministry,
it occurred to me that we are all something like Frodo Baggins,
the Hobbit who was tasked with carrying the Ring to Mordor
and throwing it into the fires of Mount Doom
from where it was forged,
to destroy Sauron, the Evil One, who would destroy the world.

We all carry the divine spark of God through our lives
as we strive to reach the goals of becoming
the people who God would have us be.

I considered Gandalf the Grey, but it occurred to me
that the Good Shepherd is less like Gandalf the wizard,
a being of power and resource,
and more like Samwise Gamgee,
Frodo’s gardener, who accompanies Frodo on the quest.

Sam truly is the hero in this story, for his story illumines
the forbearing wonder of friendship.

In my experience God/Christ is much like Sam,
as the journey is described in Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd; *
I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; *
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul; *
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
 for his Name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; *
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
 in the presence of mine enemies; *
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

On this journey, it is Sam who is the constant force for good.

No matter how often Frodo tells him to go away,
threatens him, ignores him, abuses him,
and even tries to kill him,
Sam is always there.

Sometimes Frodo leaves him behind,
but Sam always catches up.

Often Frodo abuses his friend,
but Sam knows it is the Ring that is turning Frodo to darkness.

Too often Frodo loses his way,
and it is Sam who reminds him to return to the path,
and rekindles in a reticent Frodo the desire to destroy the Ring.

God/Christ speaks to us through the Sams in our lives.
They are the constant to us as we seek to do
what we would do to build up the Kingdom of God.

No matter how often we tell God/Christ to leave us alone,
slam the door in God's face,
yell for God/Christ to leave us alone,
God/Christ always returns,
sometimes just in the nick of time.

Rarely do our insights come through the wielders of power.
Most often we are reminded of our tasks in this world by our friends.

For me it is the Sams in our lives that brings God/Christ closer to us, and eventually opens our hearts to understand the gifts we've been given in this life, and the paths that we must travel.

Sometimes we are alone, so for those cases,
And so we can be Sam to our friends,
I leave you with a few words
– 12 steps to caring for yourselves and so you can care for others.

1. If it feels wrong, don't do it.
2. Say exactly what you mean.
3. Don't be a people pleaser.
4. Trust your instincts.
5. Never speak badly about yourself.
6. Never give up on your dreams.
7. Don't be afraid to say "No."
8. Don't be afraid to say "Yes."
9. Be kind to yourself.
10. Let go of that you can't control.
11. Stay away from drama and negativity.
12. Love you.

You all have been gifts to me in the past 23 months.
You have guided me as I have sought to guide you
through the transition from what went before
to the beginnings of what comes next.

I leave you today and surrender this cure of souls
to the guidance of your next shepherd.

Amen.