
Shepherds: Northern, Southern, and Pastoral

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Easter 4 – Year A

Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” John 10:10

This week will mark the thirty-fourth anniversary of my ordination to priesthood in the Episcopal Church. I was ordained at St. Jude’s Church, in Smyrna, Georgia, and—in those days—I was able to invite whomever I wanted to be the preacher for the event. The only person I wanted was my parish priest from Christ Church, New Haven, Connecticut, where I had worked during my seminary years.

This priest was dear to me, but he was also idiosyncratic. He had been an English professor, studying at Yale, when he decided to forego that career and enter a rather monastic-style priesthood. He lived by himself, read a lot, and counseled with a deep and mystifyingly insightful air. He was meticulous about some things and absolutely careless about others. I would call him brilliant, and he taught me a lot. He was a good shepherd to me.

He was also a Yankee. A true Yankee. When I got up the courage to invite him to preach at my ordination, I learned that he had never been to Georgia before. He had never even had any desire to visit the South. He was a proud and self-proclaimed Yankee.

But he accepted my invitation. In fact, he was rather fascinated by my southernness, as I had been fascinated by his northernness. So, his first trip to Georgia was to Smyrna, in 1983, to preach my ordination to the priesthood.

As a Northerner, visiting the South, here is something of what he said that evening:

“There are two kinds of shepherds in Israel. There are northern shepherds and southern shepherds. They lead sheep differently. The northern shepherds lead their sheep by ranging out in front of the flock. They are always ahead of the flock, pulling the sheep onward, and sometimes so far out ahead—searching for fresh water and new territory—they are so far ahead that the flock cannot see them.”

“On the other hand, the southern shepherd stays with the flock. The southern shepherd even stays at the back of the flock and pushes them forward—tending and caring and cajoling.”

“Sam,” that northern priest said, at the end of the sermon, *“be a southern shepherd.”*

I still remember those words. I have actually tried both ways of shepherding in my ministry. I have sometimes failed at both ways, and I supposed I have sometimes succeeded at both ways. But I’ve also learned that the northern style works as well as the southern style. Shepherds come in just as many styles as sheep do. Sometimes our church needs the northern style of shepherding, and sometimes we need the southern style.

Sometimes we need eastern, and sometimes we need western. Sometimes we need warm and cuddly, tender loving care. And sometimes we need correction and direction.

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter in the Church Year, is often called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” By long-standing

tradition, the theme of this day is the good shepherd. We hear about sheep and shepherds. We read the Twenty-third Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

It’s Good Shepherd Sunday. Maybe we imagine lovely pastoral scenes, with fluffy little lambs floating along clean-cut meadows. Maybe we imagine a smiling happy shepherd, relaxing nearby. Maybe he is playing his harp like we imagine King David did all the time.

Of course he didn’t!

Such soft and pleasant images do not come from people who have actually been shepherders, or even farmers. Raising animals, and leading sheep, can be rugged and jostling work. Surely it is gratifying work, but it is also dirty and obnoxious work. And successful shepherding sometimes depends upon factors over which the shepherd has little control. The weather, for instance. Disease. Various wolves lurking outside the fields.

Good shepherds have to learn many styles of shepherding, if they are to lead the sheep to life, to abundant life. We sheep often don’t recognize abundant life. We are like teen-agers, maybe, who don’t quite see yet what is best for us.

Yes, the good shepherd often has to make us go where we don’t want to go. The shepherd has to corral us with staffs and crooks. The shepherd seems so demanding sometimes. Takes us away from pleasant and comfortable places. Takes us away from our mothers even! When a good shepherd is directing us, sometimes it does not feel good. It feels like the shepherd does not respect us and love us. We may cry and want to leave the flock.

It seems that good shepherds often behave in ways that are decidedly “un-pastoral.” I hear that claim, of course, in church. As a community, the people of the church inevitably rub up against each other and often rub each other the wrong way. Shepherds have to make tough decisions in church sometimes. Shepherds have to choose one way over another. And, inevitably, when shepherds make such decisions, somebody accuses them of being un-pastoral.

In fact, it is just the opposite. Being pastoral, being truly and authentically pastoral, means being willing to make tough decisions, for the common good, for the abundant life of all. Ask any parent. Ask any leader of any authentic community. Ask Jesus.

Ask “Heavy Metal Jesus.” I only today heard about a man who calls himself “Heavy Metal Jesus,” who was mentioned by one of our youth during her sermon earlier today, on Youth Sunday. Apparently, on one of our youth river rafting trips, their rafting guide was a man called “Heavy Metal Jesus.” Our youth preacher said that it took her some time getting used to him, as a guide—especially when, the very first time they were all in the raft, he deliberately flipped the raft! What kind of guide is that? Well, that is the kind of guide, or shepherd, who knows how to prepare his people for the journey.

Each of us, somewhere in our lives, has a good shepherd ministry. We guide and support and love and lead other people. Sometimes we will lead by going out ahead. Sometimes we will lead from behind. Pray for our flocks!

And each of us, somewhere in our lives, has a sheep ministry. We are being led and influenced and guided by others. Pray for our shepherds! May we enter pastures of abundant life!

Whether we are sheep or shepherd today, every one of us looks to Jesus. Every one of us looks to Jesus as the truly Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who truly does know each of us by name; that means he knows the depths of us. He knows where we are afraid, and where we are bold. Jesus knows where we are meant to go, even if we do not know it.

And that destination, that ultimate destination, that ultimate good pasture, is life. It is abundant life, life that is full and gracious and loving. Jesus said, “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

AMEN.