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## *The Shepherd Is A Lamb*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year A**

*“The sheep follow him because they know his voice.”—John 10:4*

To be a Christian is to expect things to turn around.

To be a Christian means that things turn around.

If you've been to church, you've heard about this sort of thing before. If you have read the Bible, you have read how God turns things around all the time. God reverses things. What the world expects to happen, does not happen in the Bible!

Take, for instance, the custom of family inheritance and blessing. In the world, for most of the history of civilization, inheritance and blessing go to the older child – usually a son. But not in the Bible. In the Bible, God turns things around. God seems always to be blessing the younger son! It happened with Cain and Abel, at the very beginning. It happened with Ishmael and Isaac. It happened with Jacob and Esau. In all those cases, God's blessing was delivered to the younger son, not the elder. With the young dreamer, Joseph, it was the same.

To be a follower of God is to experience things turning around.

Listen to the way the prophet Isaiah preached to the exiles.

3 A voice cries out:  
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
4 Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain. (Isaiah 40:3-4)

And then he said:

19 I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:19)

I will make rivers in the desert! I will turn things around! God has a history of turning things around.

Listen to Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and then Mary, the mother of Jesus, when she replicated that Song of Hannah, singing about how things turn around, reversing things.

Hannah sang:

4 The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.

5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.  
The barren has borne seven,  
but she who has many children is forlorn. (1 Samuel 2:4-5)

And then Mary sang:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:46-47, 52-53)

The ancient song, Magnificat, is a song about overturning: the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled with good things. To be a follower of God, and Mary, and Jesus, means to expect reversal. To expect things to turn around, to turn upside down. Opposites are reversed. Opposites become irony!

Jesus preached the same thing. In the parable of the prodigal son, it is the father who is prodigal, who is lavish with his generosity, and who kills the fatted calf for the younger son. The younger son is blessed. And remember Jesus's sermon on the mount, when he said, "Blessed are the Poor." Not: blessed are the rich; but blessed are the poor. And how about, "The first shall be last." Remember that one?

And, during this Easter season, it is worth considering what it is that we are celebrating. We are celebrating a turning around, a reversal, a turning upside-down. What was dead is now alive. Christ has died, but Christ is risen. To be a follower of God is to expect that things will turn around.

Your life might be one of them. You might well be in the valley. Maybe you have been a victim of atrocity, of awful atrocity. Maybe you have suffered, like Job, through no fault of yours at all. That kind of suffering really does happen.

And, maybe you have suffered because of something you actually did, something of your own fault. Maybe it was wrong activity, excessive and irresponsible activity, that inevitably caught up with you and brought you into the shadow of the valley of death.

You might well be in the valley of the shadow of death today, whether of your own doing, or not.

On this Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, which we have come to know as Good Shepherd Sunday, we recite the twenty-third psalm, over and over again. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me. Thy rod and they staff, they comfort me."

The Good Shepherd is with us. The Good Shepherd is with us even in the shadow of death.

And, today presents us with still another example of God turning things around. The example comes from our gospel for today, where Jesus says he is the gate for the sheep, where Jesus says he came to give us life, abundant life! He will remind us that he, Jesus, is the Good Shepherd.

Many of us have heard that beautiful and truthful metaphor for all our Christian lives. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He prepares a table for us in the midst of our enemies. He cares for us as a good shepherd does. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday.

But a curious statement appears in today's gospel about the good shepherd. It is the verse where Jesus says that the sheep follow the shepherd because they recognize his voice. The sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd.

Well, how do they recognize that voice? There are lots of voices calling out to us these days. They can be cruel and wrong, even if they sound authoritative and confident. How do the suffering sheep, the needy sheep, recognize the voice of the GOOD shepherd, among all these pretend shepherds, among all the thieves and bandits?

I believe that the answer comes later in the Bible. It is revealed in the last book of the Bible, in that strange book called, "The Revelation to John." The word "lamb" is mentioned only 34 times in the New Testament, and 29 of those instances are in the Revelation to John.

When the vision of John takes him up into heaven, when John hears the songs of angels and martyrs, what does John actually see on the throne? Well, simply put, he sees a lamb. Yes, he sees a lowly sheep. John had heard of the Lion of Judah, but the one he sees enthroned is a lowly lamb!

Here is how Revelation, chapter five, describes it:

6 Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, ...8 When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb,...9 They sing a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God  
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;  
...11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living  
creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 singing  
with full voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing!"

13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that  
is in them, singing,

"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might  
forever and ever!" (Revelation 5:6-13)

As we have sung throughout the season of Easter here at the Cathedral, "This is the feast of victory for our God. ... Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God." (Hymn 417). That hymn which we sung this morning is taken entirely from Revelation, chapter 5.

How do the suffering sheep, recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd?

It is simple. The suffering sheep recognize the good shepherd because they realize he is one of us. We recognize that this shepherd is someone who has suffered, too, who knows what it is like to be in the valley of the shadow of death.

This is another of God's incredible reversals! The Good Shepherd is actually a lamb himself. And not just any lamb. The Good Shepherd is a lamb who has suffered, and who has actually been slaughtered.

The truly good shepherd knows what it is like to be a sheep, and the good shepherd honors that identity. The Good shepherd is a suffering lamb. The sheep follow Jesus because they know the voice of one who has suffered.

This is how any of us recognize who it is we should trust. We trust people who truly know what we are going through, even if we are going through the valley of the shadow of death. We trust that voice.

Yes, the sheep recognize the voice of a shepherd who has been through that valley. God has turned things around again. To be a Christian is to expect things to turn around. God reverses things; a slaughtered sheep becomes our shepherd. The lamb who was slaughtered on Good Friday has actually become seated victoriously on the throne. The suffering lamb has actually become the Good Shepherd of the whole world.

AMEN.