

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER  
Acts 4: 8-12; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18

A World Turned Upside Down

The image of the Good Shepherd is one that resonates with so many of us. And yet if we look at the Palestinian world of Jesus, we quickly see the irony in Jesus' use of this image for himself.

In thinking back to Christmas and its wonderful images, we realize that one of the first groups of people to learn of Jesus' birth were the shepherds. Later Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. And yet shepherds were not a favored group in Jesus' day. In the words of Robert Barron, they "were considered rather shady characters, neer-do-wells unable to hold down a steady job, unreliable and dishonest. So questionable was their reputation that their testimony was inadmissible in a court of law." In God's scheme, however, they were wonderful witnesses, showing us yet again that God is able to take very ordinary and apparently unworthy people and use them for his best purposes.

And so we have much to think about as we listen and ponder today's gospel. Our consideration begins with the word good that in the vocabulary of most of us means "morally upright." In the Aramaic world of Jesus, the word had other nuances, including the sense of being ready and available at the necessary moment. Is not this the role of the Good Shepherd as Jesus describes himself as staying with the sheep when they are in danger and not running off to protect himself? Is not this role of Jesus in that perhaps more familiar image of his leaving the ninety-nine sheep that are safe and going after the one in distress, the one lost? This is the shepherd, this is *our* shepherd who is there for us when and where we need him. We so often think and act as if we need to be worthy (whatever that might mean) to be in intimate relationship with our God. Today in the depths of our being we must realize that this is simply not true.

Today's first reading presents us with a similar understanding of the word good. The apostles are accused of doing something wrong in reaching out to a man who was infirm and curing him. Rather they were showing that they were available to the man in his need and were eager to be of service. Are we as eager as we see others in need?

The two simple words good and shepherd give us much to reflect on today and during the coming week. They tell us much about our relationship to our God and much about our relationships with one another. Jesus' actions are always meant to be played out in our lives.