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During Lent, I went to several discussions on prayer at the Episcopal cathedral. One of the sessions, when the speaker didn't show up, Steve, a priest who works for the diocese, led us in an exercise where we asked the same question, "Why are you here?", several times to peel back the layers of our response. The students who preach during Easter are generally those who are completing their programs. I don't have plans to end my program this year (though with the field exams coming up, who knows?), so, why am I here? Because I have a hard time saying no and trying to prepare a homily offers a distraction from reading the umpteenth paper on the relationship between accounting earnings and stock returns or interest rates on corporate bonds. Why am I here? I attend two to three Eucharists every week and morning prayer four times a week, surely I've heard these passages many times and gained "valuable insights" into them. Why am I here? Because as someone who identifies less with being led through green pastures and besides still waters than with the Israelites wandering through the desert, caught for a time between the familiarity of Egypt which they left and the comforts of the Promised Land that that they imagined, the Good Shepherd metaphor can seem alienating and cloying. Yes, the Psalmist speaks of walking through the valley of the shadow death as well. Yes, the Israelites were led, as by a shepherd, through the wilderness where G-d provided not only manna for to meet their needs but also quail to meet their wants. Yes, there are certainly times when I have felt Divine guidance during my journey through this life. Yes, but the image of Good Shepherd is still not one that resonates with me even though sources indicate that it is one of the earliest images Christians used to represent Jesus. It is from that place that I offer my reflection on the readings for Good Shepherd Wednesday.

I tend to see readings in the Bible as moments where people are offered the opportunity to change and they either embrace the new or cling to the old. In the gospel reading for this week, I imagine that both the shepherd and the sheep embrace the new. The shepherd undergoes a profound transformation, not only in dying but also in taking up life after death. After all, why would one lay down one's life to take up the exact same thing? Death is painful and disruptive, if the shepherd were simply going to go back to tending the same sheep in the same way, surely laying down one's life would just be superfluous and G-d would not have required it. Jesus' embracing the change G-d offers leads to a twofold repetition of the command that Jesus receives from the Father to lay down his life and take it up again. First, there is the repetition in our own lives as we are called to walk in the way of Jesus. Because the shepherd leads the sheep, the sheep end up going exactly where the shepherd goes. If the shepherd decides to go through green pastures and by still waters, then the sheep get to experience that as well. If the sheep are to be brought through the valley of the shadow of

death, it is because the shepherd is also passing through that dark place. Even in the nearly automated nature of a sheep-like follower, we can expect to have to lay our lives. To a large extent, that is precisely how we become one of the sheep in fold of G-d. Becoming a sheep in the flock requires laying down a life of stiff-necked independence and taking up a life of submission. The death and rebirth inherent in laying down one's life and taking it up again allows for the possibility of change. The liminal space between the old life and the new is brimming with possibilities. In that time set apart, we can re-examine old habits and ways of being.

Then again, maybe we don't need something as dramatic as death to offer us this new beginning. Other places in the Bible and some of the prayers from the Daily Office in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer play off of the similarity of sleep and death. So, each day we are given the opportunity to take up our lives and lay them down again. This is the second repetition of large dramatic events in the microcosm of our lives. While the discussion of laying down his life for the sheep obviously recalls the crucifixion, there is no clear indication that the good shepherd's power to lay down her life and take it up again is limited to only one occasion. If she has the power and the command to lay down the life she lives now, might she not also have the power and command to lay down the next life she lives, and the one after that, and the one after that? Jesus says that the Father loves him because he is willing to lay down his life and take it up again. I think that the reason Jesus says this is because in this cycle of laying down his life and taking it up again and in the submission that requires, he makes a space for creation and renewal. Brother Mark from SSJE describes this as "participating in the creative work of the Divine Spirit" as "co-creators with G-d".¹ The power and willingness to lay down our lives and take them up again is the process of sanctification that helps bring about the Kingdom that G-d wants to create in this world.

And so, the sheep, in my mind, also undergo a transformation, as they strengthen their identification with a shepherd who lays down her life and takes it up again. As I thought about the gospel, I wondered what happened to the sheep after the shepherd laid down his life. Was there a back-up shepherd? Was there still a wolf or at least the possibility that a wolf could appear? How was having a shepherd who laid down his life better for the sheep than having a hired hand who runs away? It seems like either way the sheep are left (for a time) without any shepherd. The wolves still prowl the land and could snatch and scatter the sheep. The sheep could even disperse themselves on their own. In the situation I envision, the sheep have to figure out for themselves how to survive in this brave new world without a shepherd right beside them. That is exactly the position that the disciples found themselves in during this season of Easter. The disciples, scattered on Good Friday, regrouped and hunkered down in

¹ Brown, Mark. "The Mark of Jonah." Sermon from December 12, 2006. <http://ssje.org/sermons/?p=478>

locked rooms trying to piece together what Jesus had said and done while He was with them. They had to try and figure out how they were supposed to interact with each other, with the people and authorities around them, and with someone who had risen from the dead yet still ate and drank with them in the way they were used to. They clung to some of their old, familiar ways: They chose another disciple because they may have thought that there should always be exactly twelve men in charge of anything important. But, in some ways, the polity of the flock began to change. We don't hear of the apostles arguing over who will be greatest in the Kingdom of G-d or who will sit on Jesus's right hand or his left. During their transition from disciples to apostles, they began to mature as they realized and lived out the message that Jesus preached and as they began to assume the role of shepherd for those who were added to their number.

At this point, the sheep and shepherd metaphor begins to break down as the sheep are transformed into the shepherds. As John calls us in the epistle, we are to lay down our lives for each other, and this is the very hallmark of the good shepherd. We can become our brother's keepers, shepherds of one another in a complicated dance of interdependence where the roles of shepherd and sheep, pastor and congregation are taken up by each at different times and for different seasons.² Rather than being able to look always to the same physically present source to meet every one of our needs, we can come together utilizing each one's gifts to meet others' needs. In short, we are called to love, as in the epistle reading, "not in word or speech, but in truth and action," identifying the burdens others carry, revealing our own wounds, sharing our gifts freely with those who will benefit from them, and graciously accepting the gifts others lavish on us as we create with G-d the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth by becoming good shepherds and good sheep. AMEN.

² This idea can be found in commentary by Andrés Albertsen at www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=4/29/2012