

“DIY”

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.”

Bill Campbell was a long-time neighbor of my Uncle Richard and Aunt Hilda on their farm in northcentral Pennsylvania. Every time we would visit my favorite aunt and uncle, we would take a ride to the Campbell’s farm, where Bill and his family always greeting us warmly and brought out some cold Genesee Cream Ales that we would enjoy on his porch. Bill was usually a very warm, cheerful man; but one time his mood was decidedly darker. His farm included many dairy cows that needed to be milked and cared for on a regular basis, but Bill was finding it increasingly hard to find good help to tend to his livestock. His three sons had grown up and moved away, and Bill’s age and arthritis were making it increasingly difficult for him to do a lot of the difficult work. As we sat on the porch on that hot August afternoon, we heard Bill complain about his many failed attempts to find good workers for his farm. He first tried his nephew, who lived down the road and had always seemed eager to get into farming; but unfortunately, this nephew didn’t like getting up early in the morning, which was critical for the needs of the animals. Bill then contacted a neighbor who was looking for work to supplement his income; but again, this person’s reliability proved to be disappointing. We could see the frustration in Bill’s face as he finally concluded that “I guess if I want the job done right, I’m going to have to do it myself!”

Even though I know little about farming, I could understand Bill’s frustration and how it often seems easier to “do it yourself.” I’ve often thought of the adage that “if you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself”; and indeed, there are entire industries devoted to helping persons do a myriad of tasks by themselves. But I’ve also learned recently that none of us is self-reliant, that no matter how talented or capable we may be the frail nature of our humanity means that we often need to rely on other persons to fulfill a task or bring a project to completion. As tempting as it may be for us to “do it yourself,” it is also true that no person is an island, for *“every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main ... any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.”* (John Donne). While there may be some tasks that we can accomplish by ourselves, because we have been incorporated into the Body of Christ in Baptism we need to rely on one another to fulfill what God has purposed for us as God’s people; for *“God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”* (1 Corinthians 12:23-25).

But the same God who incorporated God’s people into an interconnected body in which each member is dependent on the other appears to announce that our Lord is going to “do it yourself” into today’s lesson from Ezekiel. This Fourth Sunday of Easter is often designated as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” the day in which we celebrate one of the Bible’s most beloved images of God as the Good Shepherd, the one who calls his sheep by names and leads them *“in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”* (Psalm 23:3). But what we often miss in this image is the necessity of our Lord’s reference to a *good* shepherd, distinguishing God for the bad shepherds who have not been faithful leaders of the people. When Jesus states that *“I am the good shepherd”* (John 10:11), he makes the distinction between himself and the poor shepherds that had given shepherds in general a bad reputation:

- “The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because the hired hand does not care for the sheep.” – John 10:12.

Jesus' need to identify himself as a Good Shepherd who will fulfill the task at which the bad shepherds had failed to accomplish echoes the words that are proclaimed centuries earlier by the prophet Ezekiel, who announces that God will take over the responsibility that God has once entrusted to the kings of Israel who were called to be the "shepherds" of God's people, but who had not been faithful in fulfilling God's will:

- "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep ... So, they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them." – Ezekiel 34:2-3, 5-6.

Because these shepherds have failed in the tasks that God had entrusted to them, Ezekiel makes two pronouncements:

1. God will rescue the people from the incompetence of the human shepherds: *"Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them."* (34:10).
2. Instead of entrusting the shepherding task to others, God will now be the one who will faithfully shepherd God's people: *"For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among the scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness."* (34:11-12).

The Lord's tending to his flock is the antithesis of the king's former, irresponsible shepherding. Following the familiar biblical messenger formula, the Lord speaks with emphatic determination: *"I myself."* God will not withdraw from the sheep but will actively search them out; God will rescue them from the places where they have been scattered *"on a day of clouds and thick darkness."* Drawing from vocabulary rooted in Israel's exodus from Egypt and entrance into Canaan, the Lord announces a new exodus that will be even greater than the first, because God will bring them out from all the lands of multiple peoples, gathering them from all the nations:

- *"I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God."* – 34:13-15.

The Lord ends this pronouncement by recasting the negative statements about the neglect of the bad shepherds into positive statements concerning the Lord's faithful shepherding of the flock: *"I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."* (34:16). God's faithful shepherding of the people includes a warning to those who would seek to exploit them that the justice which is good news for those who had once been victimized by the bad shepherds will be bad news for

those who would seek to continue such victimization. The Lord who will now be the shepherd of the people *“will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.”* (34:22). The strong sheep will no longer continue to bully the weak.

- “Yahweh will not only restore the flock. Yahweh will also attend in harshness to the ‘fat sheep’ who abuse and exploit, who deny food to the ‘lean sheep,’ and who trample the pasture ... the shepherd looks harshly on exploitative sheep, and distinguishes between strong, abusive sheep and vulnerable, weak sheep. Thus, the good shepherd attends especially to the most vulnerable sheep – in this case, needy exiles.” – Walter Brueggemann.

The work of the Lord as shepherd throughout the Old Testament is to gather the sheep in safety, often when they are exposed to serious danger. The Lord will act as a proper and responsible shepherd in order to recover the flock.

- “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” – Isaiah 40:11.
- “Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.’” – Jeremiah 31:10.

The Lord does everything that must be done so that the trusting sheep may live; the Lord provides what they cannot secure for themselves. In turn, God’s people live in glad trust of the shepherd:

- “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” – Psalm 95:7.
- “Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” – Psalm 100:3.

The good news that God has chosen to be our good and faithful shepherd is a message of confidence for us that when we are lost, when we are vulnerable, when we come to the realization that we cannot accomplish what we need by ourselves – we have a shepherd who will not abandon us or exploit us, but loves us and cares for us so that no harm will befall us nor anything separate us from the shepherd’s steadfast presence. When we proclaim that *“the LORD is my shepherd,”* we are confessing our faith in the one true shepherd, renouncing all others who would seek to have us follow them but who in the end will be nothing more than unfaithful guides who will lead us away from God’s loving care. Knowing that the Lord alone is our shepherd is an act of trust and faith, because we walk with our Good Shepherd in confidence that as surely as *“goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life ... I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”* (Psalm 23:6).

- “But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from him. ‘No one,’ He says, ‘shall pluck them out of my hand, because my Father which gave them to me is greater than all’ [John 10:28-29].” – Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

You could tell that Bill Campbell’s situation had gotten better as soon as we walked onto his porch on our next visit. He had tried for a short time to “do it yourself,” to run the farm without any assistance,

but it quickly became too great a task for one person. But then something unexpected happened: his son George moved home and took over the care of the farm. He proved to be his father's son, trustworthy and reliable so that Bill no longer had to worry if the chores were being done and the farm was being cared for properly. Bill was thankful that his son proved to be a person he could trust, someone who could help him accomplish what he couldn't on his own.

Our faith is rooted in our God who has always been trustworthy and faithful, who has always fulfilled God's promises to God's people in every generation. We do not only have a shepherd to guide us – we have a *good* shepherd in whom we place our full confidence, knowing that no matter how difficult our circumstances may be that our God is able to do for us what we cannot do by ourselves.

- “At the centre of the Christian faith is the conviction that in the universe there is a God of power who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature and in history. This conviction is stressed over and over in the Old and the New Testaments. Theologically, this affirmation is expressed in the doctrine of the omnipotence of God. The God whom we worship is not a weak and incompetent God. He is able to beat back gigantic waves of opposition and to bring low prodigious mountains of evil. The ringing testimony of the Christian faith is that God is able.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

We don't have to do it ourselves, because God has done it for us. We don't have to worry about where we are headed, because our Good Shepherd is guiding us. We need not fear if any foe will attack us or if any power will overcome us, because through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ we have the assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. The *Lord* is our shepherd – and shall be forever. Amen.