

April 21, 2013

How God Loves Us

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.' Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.'

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is called in the church year "Good Shepherd Sunday." This is the Sunday we hear the 23rd Psalm. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul..." And we hear Jesus, who surely would have known this Psalm by heart, we hear him now in the 10th Chapter of John's gospel, speaking as the Good Shepherd to his own sheep, the sheep of his flock: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

The images of shepherds and sheep, as metaphors for God and God's people, are woven throughout the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments. This makes perfect sense when we think about the role sheep played in life and economy of the holy lands for generations and generations, providing food and wool for clothing. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Moses, and King David, the psalmist, were all shepherds.

The good work of the shepherd was essential to the well-being of the people. They nurtured and tended the flocks. They moved their flocks to fertile, green pastures, making sure they had grass and water. They knew each lamb. And the sheep knew the shepherd's voice as a voice they could trust and follow.

In protecting their flocks, shepherds face danger every day. They must contend with floods, freezing winds and driving snow, with heat and drought. They must fend off thieves and robbers, smugglers, poachers, wild animals—wolves, panthers, hyenas, jackals, coyotes. They lay themselves down for a night's rest in the gap of the fence, their own body becoming the gate that keeps the sheep in and any threat out. They do whatever they need to do to protect their flock.

The love of a shepherd is tender and it is fierce. A shepherd cannot take away the dangerous things of this world, but the shepherd is willing to do anything, willing to give everything—for the flock. Jesus said it this way: "I am the Good Shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

As time went on, and the way of life became first more agricultural, then more urban, the shepherds and the flocks were pushed off to the sidelines. And over time, shepherding took on a patina of sentimentality and nostalgia, images from a time long past. Illustrations of sweet lambs cradled in loving arms hang on Sunday School room walls to this day. Shepherds, sheep, echoes of life long ago.

I had planned to preach this morning on God in Christ as our Good Shepherd. And then the news from Boston crashed into our view on Monday. Two explosions at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Three dead. Over a hundred injured, many quite gravely. Our whole nature blasted by the shock and terror of these heinous acts. And I thought: how can I speak of shepherds and lambs at such a time as this? But the more I thought and prayed and reflected, the more deeply I began to understand the ancient wisdom of our faith. God in Christ is our Good Shepherd, as present in Boston on Monday and throughout the days of this long week, as on the hills of ancient Palestine.

The Boston Common is a beautiful grassy 44-acre park in the center of the city. The sun rose on Monday on one of the first days of real Spring, flowers blooming, air sweet and clear. It was Patriots' Day and the running of the 117th Boston Marathon. The Common began its life in 1634, just a few years after the city was founded, as a cow and sheep pasture. By Puritan law, any resident of Boston could graze their livestock on this common ground. Though the law was abolished in 1830, and now the Common is a gorgeous expanse of green from which one can enjoy concerts and plays and picnics with sweeping views of the State House.

We call to mind the words of J.S. Bach, "Where Sheep May Safely Graze," which our choir has sung:

"Sheep may safely graze on pasture
When the shepherd guards them well.
Where rulers govern well
we may feel peace and rest
and what makes countries happy."

On the third Monday of April each year since 1897, not so long after those sheep were banned from the Common, the Boston Marathon has been run through the city. It is the oldest annual city marathon in the world. The Marathon is run on Patriots' Day in Boston, the holiday that commemorates the first battles of American Revolutionary War in Lexington and Concord, Mass., not far away. It is a joy-filled, peace-filled, international competition. From 18 runners in the first marathon, it has grown to the 27,000 who ran the 26.2 mile course this year. Among them was a team of runners from Newtown, Connecticut. This year's marathon began with 26 seconds of silence to honor the first graders and educators killed at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in December.

Marathons are joyous occasions, testimonies to courage and strength and perseverance. Many times more people line the route than actually run—to cheer on the marathoners, to offer them cups of water and cheers to encourage them on. No different this year. And the finish line in Copley Square, not far from the Boston Common, was packed with friends and family eager to greet their favorite runners and celebrate the day.

The explosions were designed to hurt, maim and kill. But they were also planned as an attack on the human spirit and on the values we hold most dear—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And that is why we not only grieve the loss of three precious lives, and the toll taken on the individuals and families of the injured. We respond as nation, as a people, united in our determination now to preserve the values and principles we cherish. In the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu, our Easter theme last year, we witness that "goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death."

Throughout this past week, stories have emerged of the kindness, the selflessness, the courage and compassion of those on the scene. People said that when the blasts occurred, they saw people running *towards* the scene, towards the chaos, towards the danger--before they knew if more explosions would come. They ran *towards* those who needed their help. And not just the police, the firefighters, and trained members of the military who had come as spectators. Ordinary citizens, exhibiting the best of what Patriot's Day represents about the kind of people we are.

One surgeon completed the marathon, and then kept running straight to the emergency room in his hospital to begin surgeries on the injured. Other runners kept on running to Mass General Hospital to give blood. Strangers carried injured people to safety. People staunched wounds, held shaken runners and spectators, helped people reunite with loved ones scattered in the chaos. Offering juice, cell phones, the coat off their back. Runners reported people stopping them on the streets after the blasts and asking if they needed a bed, a bathroom, a place to stay, until they could regroup. As was said of them at the interfaith service on Thursday: "they let their first instinct be kindness," and "they made of their own bodies sacraments of blessing."

The people of Boston were acting as shepherds to the fallen sheep in the heart of their city.

You could say they did this instinctively, but I think there's something that's been formed in their character that goes way back to the early Puritans and the sheep on the Boston Common and all the streams of people that have come together to form that great citizenry ever since. I heard it in the words of all their religious leaders at the interfaith service—Protestant, Catholic, Muslim and Jew. Quoting the Psalms, the holy scriptures, the Koran. This is the kind of people we are, they said in each of their particular ways. This week has revealed our character and brought us together. We refuse to be defined by those who would do evil or cause harm. We are people of love and light and strength and resilience. "We are one Boston," said Mayor Menino, who had checked himself out of the hospital to attend the service, "and we refuse to lose our trust of one another."

Maybe I heard it best said in the words of one Bostonian commentator. He said resolutely—"we Bostonians are a people of sports, politics...and revenge....and our revenge will be the laughter of our children."

On Friday night, when the processes of justice had produced an arrest, the people of Boston filled the Boston Common, and the fear, the anger, the terror, the grief of this last week gave way to cheers and joyful celebration.

I am sure that for quite some time we will be asking ourselves how two young men, one 26, one just 19, could turn from life to death and resort to such violence to work out the demons inside them. And we will be tempted to rush to conclusions and judgment, to make of others the scapegoat, tempted to let our fear harden our hearts to others.

Throughout these coming weeks, let us remember the words of Rev. Nancy Taylor at the interfaith service, whose church, Old South Church in Boston, sits just at the finish line of the Marathon, and opens its worship to runners on the Sunday preceding the race each year. She said: "Here is what I know today—we are shaken, but not forsaken. Another's hate will not make us haters. Another's cruelty will only redouble our mercy."

And let us pray each day, many times each day, the prayer our great Good Shepherd taught us. He said: "when you pray together, pray these words...."Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..."

"Deliver us from evil," prays the Good Shepherd in and through us. That is, protect us from the evil that threatens our safety and well-being. And deliver us as well from the evil of fear and prejudice that would creep into our hearts and minds and threaten to disfigure and distort our soul.

At the interfaith service, Gov. Deval Patrick brought to mind the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."

May the love and example of our Good Shepherd fill us with light and love, with peace, and with a steady determination to live as one, to keep on running, and to make every Common a still pasture, a safe place to play and sing and run and rest.

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