"Known by the Shepherd"
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Balicki
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Baptism of Fiona Ray Nichols
April 21, 2021
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine.

A story is told about two guys sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness. One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist, and the two are arguing about the existence of God with that special intensity that comes after about the fourth beer. And the atheist says: "Look, it's not like I don't have actual reasons for not believing in God. It's not like I haven't ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and couldn't see a thing. And it was fifty below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out: 'O God, if there is a God, I'm lost in this blizzard, and I'm gonna die if you don't help me.'"
And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled. "Well then, you must believe now," he says. "After all, here you are, alive." The atheist just rolls his eyes. "No, man, that was just a couple of Eskimos who happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp."

Welcome to Good Shepherd Sunday, 2024. We always read a gospel on this Fourth Sunday of Easter from the tenth chapter of John's Gospel where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. It's historically been a favorite image. I grew up with a painting of Jesus as Good Shepherd on my living room wall. The 23rd psalm is universally the favorite among the 150. No shortage of hymns to pick from either with language of a Good Shepherd. But other than my two trips to Scotland where sheep abounded everywhere it seemed from taking possession of what passed for a highway to even a couple of the golf courses I played on, I don't spend much time around sheep today and I'm guessing most of you don't either. Yet I think we can grasp the idea of why the image of a shepherd has an enduring popularity, a shepherd is a protector from predators, a guide to sustenance and shelter, a healer of the sick and injured, and a seeker of those who stray into danger.

What makes Jesus the Good Shepherd is that he lays down his life for the sheep. This is the epitome of love: his willingness to come and identify with us in our need. For him, the care of the flock is not a task to perform that is somehow secondary to his own interests. No. The sheep are ***his***. He loves ***them*** as he loves himself —more than he loves

himself. He knows his sheep, each one individually; and each one knows him. Jesus' knowledge of his sheep is as immensely personal as is Abba's knowing of him.

This knowing is characterized by each shepherd having a distinctive call that his own sheep follow. Shepherds often played their call on pipes. Most flocks were small enough that shepherds named each sheep; and most of these sheep recognized and responded to their names.

Speaking of names, we have a baptism this morning. In an older tradition when infants were baptized within days of their birth, the baptism was the time when the name of the child was revealed, first pronounced out loud. Now both because our theology has changed and for practical reasons of giving everyone some time to adjust as a family and for extended family to gather, we often baptize later. I have two favorite parts of the baptismal ceremony which both relate to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. One is when I anoint the child with chrism and say "You are marked as Christ's own forever", much as modern sheep are tagged or marked to designate who the shepherd is in a common pasture.

To be be marked as Christ's own forever is to know ourselves as no longer belonging to ourselves, as being bound to the life and guidance of a love that comes from without. Yet this obedience is true freedom and true life. Notice how Jesus, the very Son, describes his relationship to his Father. His power to take up his life and lay it down comes as "a command from my Father." Yet by this command he acts under his own power, out of his own freedom. If he lays down his life, it isn't because anyone forces him to do so. "I lay my life down of my own accord," Jesus testifies.

The other favorite part is the line "Give her an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gifts of joy and wonder in all your works". Sheep have gotten a bad rep as being stupid, defenseless and harmless creatures that mope about on hillsides doing not very much.

The reality is that sheep are actually surprisingly intelligent, with impressive memory and recognition skills. They build friendships, stick up for one another in fights, and feel sad when their friends are sent to slaughter.

Author and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes that it's cattle ranchers who have spread these bad rumors about sheep, because sheep do not behave like cows.

Cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips; but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around

behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows, but you lead sheep; and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first – namely, their shepherd – who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.

So Fiona Ray, welcome to the flock, a flock of inquiring and discerning hearts, a flock with the courage to will and persevere and a flock who knows and follows its leader, Jesus the Good Shepherd. And if you lose track of that Good Shepherd at any point in your life, may some "Eskimos" wander by to lead you back to camp.

Merciful God, we give you thanks for your gift of strength and life and especially for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we have health and salvation. Help us by Your Holy Spirit to witness your power in our lives and to know your eternal love. In Jesus' name. Amen.