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# Earth Day

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A Sermon By

The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori

April 17, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

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The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
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I have a Navajo friend whose family keeps sheep in the mountains of New Mexico. I asked her about lambing season the other day, and she said they expect lambs in May. When I lived in Oregon, the lambs were often born in February, and we talked about seeing these tiny creatures out on the grass fields with their mothers, often soaked by the wind and rain. The climate in Western Oregon is much milder than here, but it can still be pretty miserable that early. My friend said she was in tears the first time she saw those poor lambs.

Why the difference? Maybe it's just the market season in Oregon – so lambs are weaned and ready for market by summer. After all, most sheep farmers produce lamb and mutton for profit. The Navajo sheep herders in the Southwest also want to produce meat and wool – for themselves and sometimes to trade or sell. The well-being of the animals depends on lambing at a time when they are likeliest to survive and thrive. Shepherds in both places always have to consider weather and the hardiness of their stock. While it rarely snows in western Oregon after January, in Farmington it freezes pretty regularly until late April.

She told me one more story. Their shepherd has named just one of the lambs, a little ewe that prefers to ignore the shepherd and lead the flock off in another direction. He calls her “bossy” in Diné. People who raise animals for food often joke about how they name their animals – like “Stu, Roast, and Chop,” or the kid goat we had which the neighbor named “Rosebud” because its favorite feast was in his yard... When it came time for a barbecue, even he thought Rosebud was sweet.

Jesus insists that his sheep know his voice and follow where he leads, in spite of those who try to lead some astray or snatch them out of the corral. Effective shepherds are constantly looking out for the flock – do they have good grazing and clean water, are they kept out of dangerous places and protected from predators? Good shepherds have to be intensely aware of the pasture as well – is the grass healthy, or is it filled with noxious weeds? Sheep have to be kept out of the landscaping: the holly and ivy are toxic, and so are rhododendron, iris, and morning glory. Wilder landscapes have other plants that poison sheep, cause birth defects, or raging sunburn when consumed – and the plants vary with geography. Wild herds have wise elders who know where the good grazing and clean water are, but domestic flocks need savvy shepherds, who know how to find sufficient grazing at every season of the year – one reason those Oregon lambs go to market by the end of the summer.

The sheep Jesus talks about have an ancient yen to eat anything in the garden, even when they've been told not to. We also seem to have an insatiable appetite – and not just for food. Like magpies, we love to collect shiny baubles that don't have much purpose beyond the collecting. We also enjoy building machines to go to work, explore new ‘destinations,’ or race around the planet, machines that burn fuel that comes from ancient pastures. There are now enough of us that the

pasture's not producing as much good, sweet grass as it used to, the water's foul in too many places, and the air is filling with the results of our excess. In a few generations even the sheep in New Mexico will be able to drop their lambs in February – if there's any grazing left for them.

The reality is that Jesus' flocks are also supposed to share in the shepherding – of our fellow sheep, and every other creature on this planet. We have to become wiser about tending the pasture, so that this fragile earth, our island home, can be fruitful enough to provide for the basic needs of all. God invites us all to a feast, not starvation rations in the dark.

The Lamb on the throne in that Revelation dream is both sheep and shepherd, he is both host of the banquet and the menu's main course. If we're going to imitate Christ, that means relentlessly expanding the table and offering the stuff of our lives for the feast. Jesus sends his friends out to gather in more dinner guests, and keeps telling us, pick up your cross, let go of the little things, and go on out there to feed the sheep. And when things get tough, the shepherd reminds us, "I'm here, I won't leave you alone, don't be afraid."

The state of this planet is a mess. We've turned earth, sky, and seas into a dump. Our mother is imploring us to clean it up. Yet a lot of us keep taking to our beds and pulling the covers over our heads. 'It's too big a problem, what can I do? Seven billion people – somebody else is smarter or more capable.' Yet, like the woman Peter gets out of bed in Lydda, and the daughter of Jairus Jesus raised earlier, there is hope – if we're willing to get up. When Jesus heals that little girl, he tells the people standing around to give her something to eat. There's the shepherd at work, nudging the sheep: "baa-aack to work, baa-aack into community!"

We're challenged to do the same – keep spreading the banquet and supplying the table for the whole of God's creation. There are several things we can do, and keep doing, to see that everyone has a seat and a full plate. Most of those ways have ancient echoes from the journey toward "your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven."

That journey starts in gratitude and Sabbath rest – for every human being and every part of creation. Let the earth rest periodically, let the pasture renew its fertility for a season, take a rest from meat and January strawberries, discover the foods available here in this season and start experimenting with that abundance. Take a rest from frantic traffic and the chaos of airports. Tele-commute when you can. Try a vacation in the neighborhood, deepen your roots in native soil and explore the wonders around the corner. Slow down and spend time deepening friendships; reach out and discover new ones. Not only will the greenhouse cool a bit, but the banquet table and its fellowship will expand. Those connections and conscious interrelationships generate gratitude, and they will strengthen our shepherding.

Together we CAN change the course of the tragedy emerging around us, and only together, for it will require moderation in our acquisitive and consumptive lifestyles. Are we really acquisitive magpies gathering baubles to hide them away in our nests? Are we really consumptive, tubercular patients coughing our lungs out and infecting our neighbors? The Good Shepherd invites us to

another way – be a wise sheep, helping to guide the flock toward rich pastures, even through the valley of the shadow of death.

We're already seeing that shadowy valley with its death traps of burning deserts and flooding coasts. We need fences to keep us from falling in; fences that look like limitations on our individual and collective behavior. The constructive community behavior of building those fences is sometimes called "politics" – not partisan battles, but the hard work of dialogue and reconciliation for the common good. It's shepherding for the good of the pasture and its flocks. It won't be easy, but no harder than it was for Jairus' daughter or Tabitha in Lydda. We only have to say 'yes' to resurrection, to standing up and taking our place in this flock. Become a shepherd, be one of the sheep able and willing to lead others, cost what it may. Those who join this banquet give of themselves – and ultimately it is sweeter than rosebuds!