

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2018.**

The Third Sunday of Advent. Our subject today is the Shepherd's Candle, which signifies Joy.

When we think of the life of a shepherd, the first thing that comes to mind is probably not joy. It's a tough job and it's a lonely job. But think a little more. What does a shepherd do? The shepherd takes care of. That responsibility can be and ought to be a source of joy.

Care-taking, be it of sheep or children or patients or national interest or peace-keeping or self or pets, should be a deeply rewarding experience. And that correlation is not by accident. It reflects a deep part of who we are.

One of the things we do as parents is give our children increasing levels of responsibility. Make your bed. Pick up your clothes. Do your homework. Be home on time. True, one of the reasons we do this is to make our lives less hectic. But a deeper reason is that, from our own experience, we know that habits of responsibility can be a source of joy. Just as we feel better when we take care of, so we are confident that our children will feel better when they take care of.

We are built with a strong sense of purpose. And when that purpose goes unfulfilled, for ourselves or others, including and especially our children, we don't feel good. It's not just a matter of reaching our potential – an option. It's a matter of doing what we are supposed to be doing – a given.

In this morning's gospel (**Luke 3:7-18**), the crowd asks Jesus, "What should we do?" Jesus is specific in his response to a variety of audiences: "Whoever has two coats must share." "Collect no more than the amount prescribed." "Do not extort money by threats." In other words, "Take care of."

There's a reason for our place on the evolutionary scale, at least for the time being, and that reason is to honor all that has gone before, and to do so, not by exhausting it, but by taking care of it.

God didn't put things in motion and then step back and simply watch. God stayed engaged, especially in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is what you and I do as caretakers. We stay engaged as long as we can. Grandparents are model caretakers. What's the biggest fear of grandparents? Not being able to take care of children and grandchildren the way the grandparents would like.

Look at the familiar 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." When we recite this Psalm, we think properly of Lord as subject and ourselves as object. The Lord is the caretaker. We are the ones being taken care of. But couldn't the words of Psalm 23 describe us as subjects, the care-takers, and those we love as objects, those being taken care of? And isn't the transfer of the care-taking responsibility what generational life is all about? Just as God wants the best for us, we want the best for those who follow us.

Let's stay with Psalm 23 for a moment. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me."

The rod is used for protection – the poke. The staff or crook is used for guidance – the pull. As parents, we protect and we guide. "Don't mess with my kid" and "What were you thinking?"

As you know, we were recently at a 50 year celebration of an Episcopal school in Los Angeles. And one of those persons remembered was the long-time head of maintenance. Both staff and students knew him as JR, his initials. He was remembered for his kindness, humility, helpfulness, multiple skills, and his pride.

JR's job, his mission, was to take care of the school facilities, and, by doing so, help take care of the students and staff. He did it for many years and always with a sense of purpose. Care-taking was a special responsibility, perhaps in his mind even a sacred responsibility. Though never in front of a class, he taught all of us valuable lessons. In his own way, he was a shepherd.

You know people like this. You might be like this. Setting limits – the rod – and keeping others on track – the crook.

But, as good as we might be at taking-care of others, we know that we need some care-taking of too. We need the Good Shepherd, capital G and capital S. That's why we're here, and that's why we commend this experience to others. Seeing the Good Shepherd in action – rod and staff – keeps our care-taking skills in good order. And that's good for us and good for those we love. And frankly good for those we find hard to love.

Everyone benefits from the Good Shepherd, but keeping God front and center in our lives is hard work. There is nothing automatic about it. There are all sorts of things that work against it. That's why the Shepherd's Candle is pink. It's a reminder not to let down our guard or shirk our commitment even in the slightest. Remember Zephaniah's caution (**Zephaniah 3:14-20**): "Do not let your hands grow weak."

One of the ways to stay on task is to be part of a community staying on task. You and I as shepherds have company. We are a shepherding team. The team for a real shepherd however is considerably smaller. It might be just one other creature, as in a border collie.

I became acquainted recently with a little book called *Lessons from a Sheep Dog* by a shepherd named Philip Keller. The author describes how his relationship with a border collie, taught the author lessons about God's relationship with us. Here's a passage from the chapter entitled "The delight of obedience."

Ultimately our love for God is demonstrated not by sentimental emotion, but rather in obedience to His will, expressed in our loving co-operation with His commands. When we comply with His wishes, our walk with Him, our work with Him, our way with Him, become a deep delight. Not only is He immensely pleased, but so also are we.

In other words, there is real joy in care-taking, particularly when we are part of a community of care-takers. For the author, it was a community of two, a shepherd and a collie. For you and me, the care-taking community of faith is much larger and more diverse. The common ground is the delight, the joy, that members can and do experience. From the Canticle we recited this morning – the First Song of Isaiah (**Isaiah 12:3-6**): "Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation."

The Shepherd's Candle. The Care-taking Candle. Hard work, but rewarding work. Well worth our attention during this Advent Season. It's a win-win situation. A better life for others. Satisfaction for us. What St. Paul (**Philippians 4:4-7**) calls "the Peace of God." And, lest we forget, a sense of fulfillment for our supportive Advent Wreath.

One more Advent candle to go: the Love candle. Can't wait. Amen.