

## Sermon for a Service of Thanksgiving

We come here together this evening to reflect and to celebrate. In a very real way, what's happening is that someone new is joining an ongoing ministry of yours. Inevitably, though, my becoming a part of the life of this diocese means that things are different than they were before, simply because someone new is in a leadership position. And so, this evening provides an occasion for us to celebrate our new ministry together, with and to each other, as well as to reflect on what exactly it is that we're about. The Scripture I've chosen, I hope, will assist us in doing that.

I confess that I chose our opening canticle for reasons that are somewhat sentimental. Several of its verses are depicted in windows in the Chapel of the Transfiguration in Moose Junction, a place that was very important to me as a young seminarian in my own growth into ministry. But more than that, the canticle reminds us of the amazing context within which we minister. You and I are graced to have been called to proclaim the power and grandeur of God in places where, much of the time, we only have to step out of the doors of our churches to encounter God dramatically. More than so many other folks in the world, our lives are shaped by "rain and snow, frost and chill, shining light and enfolding darkness." To a remarkable degree, we encounter—and sometimes derive our livelihoods—from the "beasts of the wild" as well as "flocks and herds." This canticle speaks to who we are, as well as reminds us of those to whom we minister.

When I first went to New Mexico, one of our congregants at the cathedral, a woman whose family once owned a 100,000 acre ranch that became Los Alamos National Laboratories, said to me, "I'm tired of clergy who don't know anything about sheep talking about them." Well, I know a little about sheep, and that's why I chose the familiar "Good Shepherd" passage from John's gospel. While some folks get all warm and gushy about sheep—look at the little lamby-pies—it's hard for anyone who knows much about them to get that sentimental. Because sheep will die of thirst when there's water nearby. They'll run around and around frantically, seemingly for no reason at all, until they drop from exhaustion. And, unlike cows, they rarely get the "mother of the year" award. I remember some years ago spending hours in a cold, drafty barn, helping to get a lamb turned the right way so that the ewe could deliver it. After several hours, with everyone nearly exhausted, we finally got the little guy's legs positioned, and she was able to drop him. No

sooner had that happened then she turned, looked at her newborn lamb as if to say, “Where did that come from?” and wandered off, leaving us to find another ewe to nurse him. In short, if it weren’t for lamb chops and Shetland sweaters, I have little doubt that the evolutionary tide would have swept sheep from the earth!

But that, my dear brothers and sisters, is exactly the point of the gospel image, isn’t it? It’s precisely because sheep are sheep that Jesus compares us to them in such unflattering ways. Precisely because we tend not to do such good jobs of finding our own way, precisely because if left to our own devices we tend to get into trouble, precisely because of that, God sent Jesus as the Good Shepherd. And, even more than that, calls us to be shepherds in His image. To us belongs the awesome task of nourishing the flock, and reaching out to those who are in need, spiritual and material, to bring them into a place of care and safety. And that brings us to the wonderful passage from Colossians, likely an early hymn that Paul incorporated into his letter. Because it’s not just that we do ministry, but how we do it. These virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience aren’t just good “add-on’s.” Rather, they lie at the very heart of what we do. Because the person who badgers us with trivia on Sunday morning, or the vestry member who knows everything about everything is an icon, an image, of Christ in as real a way as the folks in the Bible Study who love us, or the faithful Altar Guild member who’s there come rain or shine. The challenge for each of us is to live into that reality of experiencing the suffering and risen Christ in every person, and shape our ministries accordingly.

New beginnings like ours can become times of great anxiety, and all too easily we can be driven by what a friend of mine calls, “The mother of all frets.” But that’s not who we’re challenged to be. Rather, as Paul continues, our call is to peace and thankfulness. Unless the peace of Christ indeed “rules in our hearts,” we can’t hope to convey that peace to the world. And we’re also called to be thankful. That’s the reason we celebrate the Eucharist, our great thanksgiving. That’s the reason we gather in prayer and worship from the cathedral in Laramie to St. Hubert’s in Bondurant. If we can’t be thankful witnesses to the infinite hope given to humankind in the dying and rising of Jesus, why in the world are we here?

But all this happens, as Paul reminds us, only if we allow the word of Christ to dwell in us richly. That means we're called to be women and men of prayer, grounded in our own individual relationships with Jesus. The Latin adage, "Nemo dat quod non habet," "You can't give what you haven't got," is nowhere more true than for those called to lead Christ's Body. We lead best not from a chair of prominence, but from our knees.

So, I begin my ministry alongside all of you who have labored here so well and so long, rejoicing in the place we call "Wyoming" that brings us so readily into the presence of the living God, challenged by the call to co-labor with you in being both good sheep and good shepherds, and rooted in the absolute conviction that if only, with hearts overflowing with gratitude, we indeed "Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him," God's kingdom will be built in this place in ways that surpass our wildest expectations. To God be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.