

04/17/16 4 Easter C

-- When most of us in Northwest Ohio think of sheep, we picture dirty white creatures living in grassy fields where they feed all day before being taken into their pens in the evening.

-- Though there are green fields in the Holy Land (particularly up north and toward the seacoast), that's not where you'll find sheep. These fields are reserved for their crops.

-- The sheep where Jesus lived are found on the rocky hillsides in dry areas. The shepherd leads them to areas where there is something to feed on, as well as a supply of water in that dry land.

-- We saw some on the way down to Jericho from the Galilee. It was not the most hospitable land. But the shepherd would take care of things. Even in our own day, sheep will recognize a shepherd's voice. He takes good care of them because they are his livelihood.

-- It's good to know these things when we hear Jesus' words about how he and his heavenly father care for us, his sheep. It's true that we are not his livelihood in the sense that God needs us to fulfill himself.

-- But God freely chooses to love and care for us as if he depended upon us for his existence. God calls us, not because we are members of a group chosen because of their ethnic or national affiliation, but simply because we are members of the human family.

-- God doesn't care about the color of our skin or the language we speak or the accent we carry. God doesn't take account of our national heritage. He only asks us to follow him.

-- In the land where Jesus walked, the shepherd also shielded his sheep from various dangers. The Judean desert where sheep grazed was and still is a fairly hostile place. There are animals who prey on sheep. There is danger from falling rocks or a sudden flash flood rushing down the valleys of that area.

-- The shepherd protects his sheep from these dangers. They are not expendable to him, because he has a special care for them. Even more than the shepherd, Jesus has a special care for us as his loved ones.

-- This weekend we ask for the Good Shepherd's special care for our young people who are receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation. Their dangers don't come from animals and floods, but from the temptations of the world young people face.

-- We also ask the Good Shepherd to shield us from the dangers of our world. Many are obvious and many are more subtle. Jesus knows all of them and gives us strength to deal with them.

-- We may not have to deal with the dangers of the desert or the problems that the Holy Land faces. For it is a divided nation with walls and electronic fences supposedly protecting people from others who do not like them or want them there.

-- But we do face countless dangers of our own. Young people face the dangers of gangs and a drug culture which now penetrates small towns as much as our cities.

-- All of us face the danger of a culture that is self-centered and often encourages divisions between people instead of uniting us together.

-- One professor once told us that baptism was the sacrament in which God grabs us by the scruff of the neck and refuses to let go. A shepherd will care for his sheep with the same fierce love.

-- We pray that we might allow the Good Shepherd to give us that type of protection. For, if we do, there is no snatching out of his hand.