

<i>Date Preached</i>	11-Sept-2022	<i>Date Initiated</i>	23-Aug-2022
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Proper 19, Yr C (Homecoming)

" 'There will be more joy in heaven ... ' "



It is one of the loveliest, most comforting images in all of the Gospels: Jesus the Good Shepherd going off to search for the lone lost sheep. When I was in Jerusalem just before my final semester of seminary—it was January 2020 ... we kept hearing rumblings about some strange new virus that was, thank heavens, confined only to China—I simply could not *not* purchase this [*gesture*] icon. Among the dozens and dozens in the shop I'd browsed for several days, this one riveted me every time I looked at it ... and wouldn't let me go. It's now in my study in the rectory, and I commune with Jesus through it almost every day. It assures me, again and again, that we *are* Jesus' lambs: so beloved of Him that He places us on His shoulders and carries us wherever we are to go.

And yet. And yet, on closer reading ... the gentle, tender parable of the Good Shepherd is also somewhat *in-credible*—in the literal sense of that word—isn't it? How reckless or foolish, to us, seems a shepherd who leaves a flock of ninety-nine-sheep—all safely gathered and protected—in the perilous badlands¹ ... while He goes off to seek the *one* scrawny lamb that's wandered away. Isn't there a wild risk-benefit imbalance here? Shouldn't the welfare of the many always outweigh the rescue of the few ... the welcome of the one?

But such *are* the merciful and mysterious ways of God. Jesus will go to the farthest lengths ... will take the most reckless² risks ... will, for the longest time, search and pray and search again for us ... until He has found every last one of His flock, the Body of believers He came into this world to rescue and save³ ... and has placed every one of us gently on His shoulders and brought us to eternal life. For such is the **joy in heaven** every time He finds one ↓ who was lost.

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As I pondered the Good Shepherd *and* Homecoming Sunday ... thought about the coincidence⁴ of *this* text being the assigned Gospel reading for *this* Sunday here at St Andrew's ... it dawned on me that this is also what *we* are for *one another*: good shepherds. Over the last two-plus years, I have marveled again and again at how well you all tend to the sheep who is sick or grieving ... keep a watchful eye out for the sheep who is failing or vulnerable ... listen compassionately to the sheep who has something she or he just *has* to say ... accommodate the sheep who straggles in, after all the seats have been taken or all the coffee is gone. You don't make a big fuss or commotion; indeed, I'm sometimes among the last to know that someone's sick or in need. But that's because this parish's unerring shepherding instincts, modeled so graciously by my predecessor, lead you to

¹ In the language of Scripture, the wilderness (or desert) is always a desolate and dangerous place. To name only one example of scores, it is where Jesus' temptation by Satan takes place.

² Reckless, that is, in *our* view. The Almighty Godhead is, in truth, impervious to any existential risk.

³ Which is to say, all humanity.

⁴ One dear seminary professor of mine would call it a "juxtaposition." Thank you, Dr Lathrop.

generously and quietly seek out the 'lost' sheep ... the hurting sheep ... the hungry sheep ... and do all you can to nurture, care for and comfort them.

And, what's more ... St Andrew's *also* practices the same divine recklessness ... the same holy risk-taking ... that the Good Shepherd Himself does. The same urge that drives the Good Shepherd not to rest until *all* the sheep are safely gathered in ↓ is also deeply woven into the fabric of this place. Here at the corner of Bridge and Main, we strive to hold the door wide open and offer a warm embrace. We believe it's essential to welcome—not just coolly tolerate, but truly *respect* and *love*, in Christ's name—those whose politics ... whose values ... whose tastes and preferences ... whose traditions ... may be at odds with **ours**; ... essential to follow His example and seek out those whose lifestyles ... bank accounts ... orientations ... interests ... households ... abilities ... choices ... gifts ... experiences ... do not resemble **our own**.

We welcome into the flock those who love music and singing ... and those who don't. We count equally among us those who sign up for everything ... and those who have one favorite ministry or activity they take part in. We honor those who relish delving deeply into Scripture and exploring the Anglican tradition we've inherited ... and those for whom it's enough to live them on Sunday mornings. Valued no differently as sheep of the St Andrew's fold are those who pledge and those who don't; those who know everybody and those who keep more to themselves; those who never miss a Sunday Eucharist and those who come only occasionally.

And yes, to the world—our increasingly divided, us-VERSUS-them world—this *does* look reckless ... if not downright *foolish*. Why, many ask us, do you go to a place where not everyone likes what you like? where not everyone votes the way you do? where not everyone shares your values? where not everyone believes just like you? And our answer is simple: Jesus. Like our Good Shepherd, we cannot rest as long as even one sheep is lost; and just like Him, we **glory in** the joy of heaven every time another returns to the fold.

With the Good Shepherd as our model, we look past differences and embrace those we may disagree with ... because in keeping them from straying away, we **glory in** the joy of heaven. With the Good Shepherd as our model, we gather in this place to love and nurture others, even when we could be eating brunch or gardening or reading the Sunday paper or golfing ... because in tending to this flock, we **glory in** the joy of heaven. With the Good Shepherd as our model, we willingly sacrifice our time and talent and treasure, to keep St Andrew's healthy and vibrant, responsive and caring ... because in feeding and shepherding this beloved parish, we **glory in** the joy of heaven.

This flock we call St Andrew's ... all the joy and fellowship; all the caring and sharing; all the sacrifice and compromise ... may be, for us who call it home, the closest place to heaven we know on earth. And so, I welcome you *all home*, my sisters and brothers in Christ. Welcome to your glorious heavenly home!



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