**Sermon Easter 4A**  Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

Sunday 18th April 2016

I have been to Indonesia just once, thus far, in my life. For most New Zealanders a trip to Indonesia means a holiday in Bali. My trip wasn’t a holiday and wasn’t in Bali. I went with Jan Tasker, who had just completed her term as Vice President, to represent the Methodist Church at a conference hosted by Jakarta Theological Seminary. We landed fairly early in the morning and once through customs and immigration found ourselves at the edge of one of Asia’s largest and most chaotic cities; a place neither of us had been to before. For some 40 minutes we resisted the invitations of taxi drivers and sat gingerly on the edge of the busyness of the arrivals hall. Until a young woman, a student at the college we would be staying at, came through the crowd and said to me “David?” Our heroine then shepherded us through the car park and then through the kind of traffic which really has to be seen to be believed.

Few things are as reassuring as hearing your name spoken when you feel lost, wary, unsure or afraid. Something we see in several of the resurrection accounts; think back to Easter Day and how when Mary is called by name her whole world changes. Today, on this fourth Sunday of Eastertime, we reflect on the one who calls us, all of us, by name .On this Sunday we are presented year by year with the image of Jesus as good shepherd, the one who calls his sheep and is recognised by them.

Now what use is a shepherd without sheep; and that is where you and I come in. Now how do you feel about that? Of all the animals we are likened to sheep. Not to powerful majestic lions or tigers, not to the soaring eagle, not to the graceful deer or the intelligent dolphin.

Yet we don’t recite or sing that the Lord is our lion tamer; no we are sheep. Ordinarily we would, I think, take great offence to being called sheep or sheeplike. They are, after all, not the brightest of creatures. Sheep are not known for their originality, they just follow their leader. We do not like to have our intelligence impugned and we value our individuality, our autonomy, our freedom. When I loved in Nelson I chaired a public issues discussion group and one of our sessions was on the the TPPA. I remember one person there saying she wished the “sheeple” would wake up from their docility and resist.

While we take offence at being compared to sheep the curious fact remains that while much familiarity with and knowledge of the Christian faith and of Christian worship has been swept away almost the one thing left for many people is the twenty third psalm. Granted if you were to go and find where most people are gathering today, in cafes and in shops and ask them what a psalm is they would probably not have a clue. Yet mention the twenty third psalm and the penny will drop; It’s “*that one*,” *the one they have at funerals isn’t it?”*

Or the theme tune for the *Vicar of Dibley?*  Added to how it has persisted is how very early Christians took to this image, some of the very earliest Christian art, frescoes in places of worship wasn’t of the cross or crucifix, it was of Jesus as the good shepherd.

How come? How come that this psalm – this prayer of praise – has endured so long in the memory and affection of people with little or no grounding in Christianity? There are psalms which are better, more elegant poetry yet this one has stuck. Early on in my ministry, so wearily resigned to it being in every funeral I took, I used to say only half in jest I would only have it at my funeral over my dead body. Of course I probably will, literally, but I’ll be in no position to complain about it.

I think it is because, though we pride ourselves on our autonomy and independence, something deep within us longs for protection, for someone to watch out for us, for guidance when the going gets tough. To call us by name and lead us to where we need to be.

We are not sheep, we are intelligent and discerning but we are faced with a multitude of voices, we are called this way and that. We long to discern the voice that calls us towards life, to safety, to a secure place.

Perhaps never more so than in times like these, in the midst of a pandemic when all around the world a multitude of sometimes shrill voices call this way and that. We have been fortunate in this country to have the calm, measured reassuring Dr Ashley Bloomfield to speak for the Government on best practice to combat the coronavirus. Unfortunately in the United States his American equivalent, Dr Anthony Fauci, has become a polarising figure in a society where responses to the pandemic seem to be part of an ongoing culture war between right and left.

In a confusing situation, in one where we are anxious, uncertain, fearful even we need a shepherd’s voice, we need someone who can speak clearly and calmly and say this way, “ this way even if it is going to be difficult because really this is the only way to get where we need to be”.

Like the sheep who know the shepherd’s voice, who will follow the true call towards safety and good pasture.

Our reading from the Gospel of John is a challenging one. It shows us the risks and costs of being a shepherd. Our mental image of shepherds is, I suggest, a fusion of pastoral images inherited largely from our British and European heritage. Maybe you imagine a man walking with his crook over a gently rolling English hill keeping an eye on his sheep. Alongside this rural idyll there we draw on our own experience here of massive sheep stations and the historic primacy of sheep farming in our economy. Didn’t New Zealand, after all, become rich on the sheep’s back?

One way or another we think we know sheep farming.

But we don’t know what about sheep farming in the Middle East back then. In an arid place, with limited water and plants here and there rather than boundless green hills.

There is a poem *The Folding Star*, by Milton. The folding star is Venus, which rises in the evening as a signal to shepherds to gather their flocks in a safe place , this was how shepherding had been for millennia. Our Gospel sounds strikingly like the life of a shepherd in Milton’s poem. Here is a shepherd who places himself at the entry to the sheepfold, whos body is placed between the sheep and any possible dangers.

Here is a shepherd whose voice is known by his sheep, here is one who calls out and guides his sheep towards safety and away from danger.

Today’s Gospel reading ends just before Jesus calls himself “the Good Shepherd.” We might not hear it today but it is implicit in what we heard.

Why do we read this story in Eastertime? It isn’t an account of a resurrection appearance after all. I think it I s because it is an intimation, an allusion to our resurrection. Here in the Jesus story is a path to life, to our own participation in the resurrection. That faith in him, following his path is a journey into life and wholeness.

And what of us? Could it be that we too are called by name into life in order that we ourselves be life giving. Let me conclude with this thought.

Whose name do you speak? Who do you call out to in ways which speak of life? Who is nurtured in relationship with you, what causes are supported by your recognition of them? It is in our recognition, in our naming that we build up love, justice and possibility. In this we are following the path the Good Shepherd calls us to tread. Amen