

So, a few years ago, I had an old college friend visit me while I was living in Arizona. It's always nice when friends come to visit, isn't it? Especially now after a year of isolation... Well, for his visit, my friend rented a 2017 Dodge Challenger... V8 HEMI, rear wheel drive... the quintessential muscle car. Anyway, we were driving around out on these remote desert roads and having a great time, let me tell you, those cars are fast.... Well, we decided to take the long way home when I noticed a road on my GPS map that went around the mountains. At the time, it seemed like it would be a great scenic route and a wonderful idea, but as they say, hindsight is 20/20.

We made the turn onto an unnamed road, which by the way... Started out as a normal paved road. A few minutes later, we found us ourselves on a gravel road, no big deal, right? and a little later yet, our gravel road turned into a dirt road. About half an hour in, we were in our sports car, lost, and our dirt road had turned into a dirt path... And, we found ourselves off-roading in a sports car through creek beds. We, eventually thought, hmm... perhaps we should turn around. That, perhaps this might have been a bad idea. And, being two city boys, neither of us could have guessed that turning around a rear wheel drive sports car in a creek bed

was an even worse idea... As I'm sure you could have guessed, we got stuck. So here we are in the middle of nowhere, in the desert, about 7-8 miles from the nearest paved road, calling towing companies to see who might be willing to come our rescue. We were about as lost as you could get. Well, the third tow truck driver finally agreed to come find us after saying, "It'll cost you". I gave him the best directions that I could, and about four hours later, he found us, and we were rescued. Probably one of the stupidest things I've ever done, but while I was in the desert, I began "theologizing" on the experience, (because that's what nerdy priests do) I thought, "this'll preach"... And it does preach, because, there I was, in a literal valley of death, needing rescued, needing saving, needing a good shepherd to leave the much smarter members of his flock like all of you behind and risk everything to save me.

So here we are on Good Shepherd Sunday, and we find Jesus talking about shepherds, and sheep, specifically about how he is the Good Shepherd. Most of us who have been in church for a while will have heard something about shepherds from time to time. One might say it's one of those themes in the bible both new and old testaments, that keeps on giving... Psalm 23 which we read earlier is a favorite of

many people. Did you know that in the original Hebrew, the word structure that made up a psalm often had as much to say to us as the words themselves... For instance, in its original language, there are 26 words before the phrase "Thou art with me" and 26 words after... This signals to us, that the point of the psalm, is that whether you're beside still waters and green pastures, or you're in the valley of the shadow of death... God, is with us... Our Good shepherd is here...

With all of this, a question comes to mind for me... How many of us are familiar enough with the trade of raising sheep... That is, being a shepherd, that the images that we read about in today's gospel will have any impact? My guess is not many of us have done much sheep herding, though, who knows, there might be a couple... (Ask someone if they've got any experience sheep herding)

I'd like to briefly talk a little bit about sheepfolds... A sheepfold was like a pen of sorts that had a fence around it, and an opening in the front without a gate. After bringing the sheep in for the night, The Sheppard of the flock would sleep in the entryway, in essence, he was the gate, and he was keeping the sheep safe inside, and protecting the sheep

from wolves and the like that might want to get in and have a nice dinner.

A hired hand wouldn't protect the sheep... But a shepherd who owns and loves his sheep would use his own body to protect the sheep from harm. Not only because these sheep were his livelihood, but also because he has raised these sheep... He may have even delivered them... He knows how vulnerable they are, and he has protected them since they were suckling lambs... So, here's something for us to think about today... If we are able relate to the idea of being vulnerable, then the message of today's gospel is packed full of meaning for us. But if we can't really relate to that idea... If we haven't really connected with our mortality Well, then this is a likely nice but forgettable passage of scripture and this will likely be a nice but forgettable sermon...

... It is difficult to identify with vulnerability if you haven't felt unsafe... Really unsafe... You know, there are a lot of people in this world whose very lives are threatened everyday... Either by sickness... Or by where they were born... Or perhaps because some politician decided to go to war... Or maybe their lives are threatened because of their profession... or perhaps they fear for their lives and the lives

of their loved ones merely because of the color of their skin...

I can't pretend to know what most of these experiences are like... *But I can listen... I can listen, and I can lament, and I can work and do my best to show people who are hurting and who are fearful, the love of Jesus Christ...* I mean, that's one of our main responsibilities... As Followers of Christ... As Christians... We are called by God to listen to the voices of those who are in pain, those who are in need, those who feel threatened, and completely and totally embody the love of Jesus, embracing those who are hurting, and working toward practical ways to build God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven... All so that, perhaps one day, there might be healing, and others will be spared at least some of the pain and vulnerability that comes with being alive in this world today.

As Christians we are called to make this a better world for all people... If we can connect with the idea of being vulnerable, really vulnerable... If We can either sympathize or learn how to have empathy... Then the idea of Jesus as the good shepherd can actually be pretty meaningful...

And the reality is, is that we have a savior and good shepherd in Jesus Christ. Jesus, who died that we might live. Jesus, who sacrificed himself for the sake of the entire world. Jesus our good shepherd, who has defeated death by dying, and has given us the gift of eternal life by rising again... And what's more is that God says we are all are worth it... Every last one of us... God says each and every one of us are worth, the incredible love, that was poured out on the cross.

And in turn, God has then called us to be shepherds as well. Giving of our own lives, pouring out God's love, caring for our neighbors... This, is what we, are called, to do. We listen for and recognize the shepherd's voice, and we work to build the kingdom of God here on earth, brick by brick, person by person, changed life by changed life.

In today's gospel, we hear Jesus say that there are other sheep that belong to him, and that he will bring them in as well, that they will know his voice. Think about that for a second... If You're a republican... That means Jesus is saying the democrats are his sheep as well... And If you're a democrat... Well guess what... The same logic applies...

The question that is implied in our reading today... The question that is implied day after day in our lives, is whether or not, we will recognize our shepherd's voice, hear the truth in his words, and join together to reach out into this world to and love others because he first loves us...

So, my prayer for each and every one of us today, is that we will hear our shepherd's voice. My prayer is that we will be inspired by how Jesus laid down his life for us.... That we will love, and that we may especially love those who have been marginalized, those who have been cast aside and forgotten... And those who feel their very existence is threatened and need our good shepherd to lead them out of the valley of the shadow of death, to green pastures and still waters... All so that their souls and perhaps someday the soul of this very world, might be revived...

Amen

Fr. Kenn