

**"The Long Journey to Love and Back"**  
A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church  
on April 22, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Easter 4)  
Scripture Readings: John 10:11-18  
I John 3:16-24  
(The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

One of the most significant experiences in my trips to the Middle East was standing outside of the city of Bethlehem looking at the hillsides where shepherds tended their flock before the birth of Jesus, or shepherds did what Jesus spoke about in his parables, including the one shared today. Those hillsides have changed dramatically. They are now prime areas for real estate, and many lovely homes grace the hillsides. Yet somehow I can envision the sheep that once grazed on those grasslands, and imagine the work of the shepherds who tended them day and night as part of their work of love.

The Right Rev. Anne Germond, Bishop of Algoma, and a number of priests of the Anglican Church from this region and beyond are currently touring the Middle East, including a visit to Bethlehem, so we wish them well and remember them in our prayers. I must admit I would not be as eager to visit that region today as I was in 2007 and on two other occasions.

Few of us have the ability to really resonate with the image of shepherds from the first century, or even shepherds period. They are a rare breed in northern Ontario. A former chair of the Lambton County Board of Education moved into the New Liskeard area in the 1980's to set up a sheep farm, as farming areas are more plentiful in that region than in most parts of northern Ontario, but the role of the shepherd is often a lonely and difficult one, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So I am not even going to try to figure out how we can relate to shepherds directly this morning, but suggest to you the shepherd is a symbol of many ways in which we connect to nature and God's world.

Earth day was this week, and there are many ways that we understand the importance of being concerned with creation and preserving the goodness of the earth. How many of you are itching to get shovel into soil and plants readied for their summer display around your home? Do you have seedlings preparing for planting in the still snow covered gardens, or plants ready to plunk into rich, thawed soil?

I could not wait another day to drag out the spring/summer suit for wear. Enough of the winter tweeds!

But Earth Day, like the story of the Good Shepherd, is not about the transition of the seasons or the warming of our climate. It is about respect for the environment at any time and age.

Teachings by Jesus, at least as they are recorded in the gospels, often sound dramatic and severe. I am not convinced they always accurately record the way that Jesus shared them,

or exactly what he meant. But if there is a certain severity in what Jesus shared, I imagine that he wanted all of us to reflect on how we come across to others.

Sometimes our vocal tone, our facial expressions, our positioning of our bodies, belie a certain attitude that we do not mean, maybe do not even consider, when communicating with others. We all have been taught the negative power of an email with all capitals – it is like shouting at the top of your voice to someone else. Not a welcome way to communicate.

The story shared this morning is a reminder that we reveal to the world what we hold as important by the way that we support and defend those around us. Silence is not an option in the midst of injustice and threat to others.

We never have all of the answers. We are always learning, struggling, discerning. Sometimes it is the hardest to know what we should do and how we should do it with those we love. Yet getting the formula right in our relationships, and our inter-actions, is worth it – it is like walking through a gate with confidence and with the promise of new life.