

Perhaps some of you personally know, Peter Ralston, the photographer of this iconic photo, titled “Pentecost.” Peter Ralston and Philip Conkling created The Island Institute, to help Maine’s island and coastal communities tackle environmental and socioeconomic issues. We are grateful to them for this pioneering work.

I couldn’t help but think that this photograph might be the perfect icon for Good Shepherd Sunday and Earth Day. But first, here’s a story that Ralston tells about the origin of his photograph, published in the newsletter, Soundings:

We made arrangements with two Port Clyde fishermen to help us get the sheep to Allen Island. All went well until the skipper declared, “There s not a single one of those [explitive deleted] things getting on this boat today.” We had no choice but to borrow a dory into which we loaded the sheep. I borrowed Betsy s Aquasport, from which I made photographs of Susan L towing the dory. On the run to Allen Island, we ran into a fog bank off Mosquito Head and, all of a sudden, the light went silvery...magical. I quickly took a number of photographs, but wanting a different angle, I gave the helm to Philip, telling him to get me close up to the stern of the dory. I was using a wide-angle lens, and I wanted more in my foreground, so I kept yelling get closer, get closer! We knew we had achieved maximum proximity when the bow of the Aquasport slammed the stern of the dory a mighty blow. At that very second, I managed to squeeze off this single vertical frame.



We have a skipper who knows what he’s about and where he is heading. And we have a dory full of sheep riding the yawing wake of the Susan L. I wonder, do sheep get sea sick? Do you ever yearn for a captain/shepherd who knows where he/she is going, takes us along, and has our best interest at heart?

I don’t have a lot of experience with sheep other than those I’ve met at the Common Ground Fair. What I do know is idealized. I think of the statue of the Good Shepherd at The General Theological Seminary. Jesus is carrying a lamb on his shoulders with another peeking out from behind Jesus’ flowing robe. What we do know is that you cannot train sheep; they need to be guided. They scare easily. There are often a few internal leaders in a herd – but the majority of sheep are happy to follow. Most of the time they’re quiet, but if you’ve ever tried to catch one, you will know that they can scream!

When we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders, we can think of that lamb as being quite docile. However, I think it is more likely that the lamb is bleating and squirming, trying to get free. Maybe if we’re honest with ourselves, we might find that closer to our own experiences, too. Maybe you like to believe that when Jesus carries you, you are well-behaved – that you know God knows better than you do, and you’re willing to let go of control and allow God to work...In reality, most of us bleat and struggle to get free.

Though we know Jesus is the Good Shepherd, it can still be hard for us to fully trust him. Phrases like “Let go and let God!” might be easy to say, but are not easy to do. Think of those questions asked at Holy Baptism, *Will you put your whole trust in his grace and love?* That’s a

tall order. We say, *I do* because that's what's written in the Prayer Book but you know and I know that it's easier said than done.

I am struck by utter commitment of the shepherd. We hear about laying down one's life at several points in the readings. In the First Epistle of John, "*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*" It sounds like John is asking us to be willing to die for one another. After all, that's what Jesus did; he laid down his life on the cross. And from time to time there are men and women across history who literally give their life for another or for the Gospel itself (we call them saints). When we look at this idea expansively, we realize it we do figuratively lay down our lives all the time.

We lay down our lives when we put someone else's needs above our own. When we stay up late to help a child with their homework, or cook a meal for the family, even if we're not that hungry. We lay down our lives when we say "yes" to service in some way, befriending another, giving our time to a good cause. We lay down our lives, finally, when we give up control, when we stop wriggling and bleating and, instead, relax into the arms of the Good Shepherd, trusting that God is taking us to good, green pastures, leading us beside still waters.

Laying down our lives is hard because it challenges everything the world teaches us: self-made, in control, independent. Laying down our lives requires us to know our place as the sheep, not the shepherd. Sometimes, when we ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" we put ourselves on par with God – forgetting that God is God and that we are not. We forget that God is good beyond our imagining, kind beyond our understanding.

When Jesus lays down his life for us, he is full of humble service. When we think of the Good Shepherd, perhaps we think of the bishop's crozier or shepherd's staff with two functions: to ward off danger (the pointy end) and to pull back wayward sheep (the curved end). The Good Shepherd travels alongside us, willing to accompany us, to lay down beside us, to face death, just so we would know that we are not alone. Our shepherd is good, even though we might not be. We are sheep – neither fully good nor fully bad. Perhaps we are annoying at times, maybe simple at times. But who we are pales in comparison to who God is.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we are the sheep. We lay down our lives when we live into that relationship, when we trust that our shepherd sees things we do not, and knows things we do not, and has foresight that we do not. Our invitation this morning is to lay down those burdens we have been carrying, to lay down our lives, to remember that Jesus is our shepherd, and we are all sheep. Revise that image you have of Jesus carrying the lamb on his shoulders and replace it with you. We are all in that dory being towed by the Susan L. This morning, be assured that Jesus is carrying us – carrying you – on his own shoulders, carrying us over the tempestuous sea. May this knowledge—may this assurance be a blessing.

The Rev. Paul Briggs
The Fourth Sunday of Easter 2024
St. Thomas' Church, Camden, Maine