

“Our Good Shepherd Pilot”  
 Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis  
 April 22, 2018  
 Easter 4B 2018/Earth Sunday  
 1 John 3: 16-24 & John 10: 11-18

So, there are a lot of things coming together today. There’s Good Shepherd Sunday and there’s Earth Day. And we’re in the middle of the Easter season which means that resurrection is still on our minds.

Usually, I actually enjoy trying to bring it all together. I like wrestling with how things are connected and how they speak to each other. I like trying to hear what the Gospel is in it all.

But this year, I’ve found it harder to do Earth Day and find the Gospel in it. There’s definitely a prophetic word to preach.

We currently have the most anti-environmental cabinet in history. Congress has given coal companies the go-ahead to pollute waterways. Air pollution, pesticides, poor diets and radiation all play a role in a sharp increase in cancer diagnoses among children.

Internationally, environmental activists like Waldomina Costa Pereira in Brazil are literally laying down their lives for the well-being of the earth and poor farmers. Costa Pereira was shot to death while he was in the hospital recovering from an assassination attempt.

And then there’s the church. . . As our Presiding Bishop Eaton says, we need to confess our “lack of urgency” about our rapidly changing climate and our responsibility for the well-being of creation.

There is definitely a prophetic word to speak—something to prod us along like a shepherd’s crook—something to move us and get us going.

But what I’ve been struggling with is the Gospel. Where’s the Gospel in this? Not just something to make us feel better or less guilty, but the honest to goodness Good News.

And what about the Good Shepherd? We’re not sheep ranchers. We might love the poetry of this image but I think the power of it is mostly lost on us.

So, I found another image that isn’t a perfect parallel to the Good Shepherd but might open it up a bit for us.

I am guessing that many of us heard about the Southwest Airlines flight that had one of its engines break off in mid-flight. A piece of the engine broke one of windows and, tragically, a passenger was hit by it and sucked out the window. Other passengers got her back in but she died later from her injuries.

Ordinarily, I would not focus on the details of an airline crisis because I am really affected by these kinds of stories. But I got drawn in by the actions of the pilot, an experienced pilot who was also a navy veteran, by the name of Tammie Jo Shults. I listened to her voice as she told the air traffic controllers on the ground what was going on. She was calm and focused. Captain Shults told them she had 149 *souls* on board and she needed to do an emergency landing.

Passengers described not only her heroic, skillful actions but her soothing voice over the P.A. system. After the explosion, she took the plane into a rapid descent and she explained it to

them. “We’re descending. We’re not going down. We’re descending. Just stay calm, brace yourselves and everybody keep your masks on.”

When she safely landed the damaged plane in Philadelphia, they broke into applause. Captain Shults asked everyone to remain calm while the medics came on board to get the injured. And then she came out and spoke to each person individually and shook every hand. In the written statement that she made on behalf of the whole crew, she focused not on her heroic actions but on the immense loss for the family of the passenger who was killed.

Captain Shults’s family members described her as a formidable woman, sharp as a tack. As a very caring and giving person who takes care of lots of people. And as a devout Christian. Her mother-in-law said she was sure it was her faith that enabled her to be so calm and clear-headed.

This is an amazing and inspiring story. And on this Earth Day it just might be an image of the Good Shepherd. The state of our planet is like that damaged plane. There are already people who have died and people who have been injured as a result of the extreme weather caused by climate change.

I really do understand why some people can’t accept the science behind climate change—because the news is really bad. It’s like being told 30,000 feet in the air that you’re on a damaged plane and all you can imagine is a crash landing.

But the Good News is that we are not alone in the plane. We have a Good Shepherd Pilot who is in there with us—and who is leading us.

I said this wasn’t a perfect image—and that’s because it could be a picture of God’s going to take care of everything. God’s going to deal with climate change and make it all right in the end, so there’s no need for us to get all worked up about it.

But just like on the Southwest flight, it matters what all of us on the plane or on the planet are doing. The Good Shepherd Pilot calms our fears. He calls on us to tend to those who are hurt by climate change and the spoiling of the earth. And he shows us that we’re not going to get there safely on our own but we can get there together.

One of the most common stereotypes about sheep is that they are stupid. A favorite preacher of mine says that this stereotype was started by cattle ranchers who didn’t have any experience with sheep. The cattle ranchers treated the sheep the same way they did their cattle, prodding them from behind to get them where they need to go. It didn’t work.

It didn’t work because need to be led from in front. They need to hear the shepherd’s voice ahead of them. They need to be called forward instead of being pushed from behind.

From my perspective, that’s true of us, too. Maybe we’re more like sheep than we think.

A few weeks ago, I saw a trash can that really caught my attention. It was red and white, and had the outline of DC on it and it said “Show Some Love.” Apparently, it was part of a pilot project to test positive messaging. I loved it. It’s what leading from the front looks like.

Our second reading from First John talks about love and how Jesus, our Good Shepherd, leads us from the front. Love isn’t just words, it’s actions. We have the unparalleled example of Jesus who was all in—his whole life was love in action. He lays down his life and he calls us to follow him and lay down ours. I think that means make love real. Embody it. Incarnate it. Give it flesh.

That's our calling on this Earth Day—every day. How we do that is always a work in progress. Many of us do things in our individual lives like composting or driving hybrid cars or using public transportation or biking—that we see as putting love in action.

But on this Good Shepherd Earth Sunday, I think we are being led to more than individual actions. The Shepherd leads a flock. As people of faith who believe in God's creative and renewing power—as Easter people who believe that Jesus is alive in us now—we have the power to make love for the earth real.

We're at the beginning stages of a making a community garden in front of the church. The specific vision is still being shaped but the hope is that this will be a place where people in the neighborhood—especially people who don't have their own yards and gardens—can have a chance to experience the soul-rejuvenating wonder of growing something.

And Pastor Lee has already started working with some families at the Partner Arms 1 apartment building to make a garden there—something that others could be a part of, too.

These are both ways of loving in action and of being part of a flock that follows the Good Shepherd.

There are other ways—that might bring us closer to those other sheep that Jesus is talking about—the ones who know his voice but aren't part of this flock.

One possibility for loving action that I'm learning more about is a local DC effort called, "Put A Price On It." It's a creative and well-researched plan that would tax major carbon emissions polluters like utility companies. Most of those taxes would come back as rebates to DC residents, some would be invested in green jobs, some would fund a tax cut for small businesses. The aim of this plan is to deal with both income inequality and reduce carbon emissions that cause climate change.

These are just a couple of examples that are Good News—Gospel—because they are ways that feed our spirits and lead us to life—lead us to a life lived for others. Lead us to loving actions rather than throwing up our hands in despair. Because we know we have a Good Shepherd Pilot who is leading us—and this whole planet—to life, we can face the truth of the seriousness of climate change and our hurting earth. We can look around and care for those who are bearing the brunt, those who are injured. And we can listen to the voice of our Good Shepherd Pilot and follow him to pastures that are green and water that is life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.