

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Last week, we had stories about fishing. Those, I think, we can kind of get into, here on the banks of Lake Michigan in the fine state of Wisconsin. But sheep? Shepherds? Those are a little harder to work with for city dwellers like us.

Still, we are not starting out completely in the dark. We know a little something about sheep from books, nursery rhymes, birthday petting zoos. We can make use of our imagination to understand that the sheep is vulnerable and soft. And that the shepherd is vital to the safety of the flock. The church has been playing with this metaphor forever, even giving bishops big shepherds' crooks to let people know that they are the protectors of the flock, or in their case, the church.

But the readings today are actually a little confused on who Jesus is in all of this. In the psalm, God is the shepherd, and in the gospel reading, Jesus is the shepherd. This all sort of makes sense. In the season of Easter, it follows that the church would want to remind us that we will know the voice of the risen savior when he speaks. Even our hymns talk about the ways that our savior Jesus is our shepherd – our safety, our leader, our source of sustenance.

The passage from Revelation though is a bit of a puzzle. In it, Jesus is not the shepherd. Instead, Jesus is a lamb, that sits on a throne at the end of time forever. And when the people, robed in white, see that lamb on the throne, they sing hymns for all eternity. This part of the story, I think, is the most mysterious and most interesting.

If you can think back to Palm Sunday, you remember that we celebrate the triumph of Jesus on his way into Jerusalem, not on a warhorse, but instead on the back of a humble donkey, greeted not by the powerful from the temples and palaces, but instead by the poor on the streets who wave palms instead of gold banners. And the authors of the new testament, take this idea of inverted power and run with it today. In the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, seated on the throne will be – not a king in armor, but a lamb. The soft, the weak, the vulnerable, and the unexpected will be enthroned and worthy of worship. Is Jesus our shepherd? Or is Jesus the Lamb worthy of praise? Well, the scriptures let you decide, I suppose, depending on what kind of day you're having.

I want to take a little detour to my first off-campus house when I was in my 20s. I know this is a non-sequitur, but I promise I'll come back to the Lamb on the throne. I had a marvelous roommate who was studying philosophy, and when she would come back to our shared room (I slept on a futon mattress on the floor, as you do), she would regale me with logic problems and some of the big questions about who we are and what makes a good life. While she had to read all the big philosophers of Athens, Rome and later Europe, she really was more drawn to modern philosophers looking to address modern questions. In particular, she was interested in how the great thinkers of the day were tackling the great problems of the day. She was fascinated by how philosophy was addressing the problems of climate change and deforestation. Some of the

thinkers she was reading argued that sitting in your office and coming up with systems and categories wasn't actually helping arrest the denuding of forests. Instead, they argued, a philosopher should get up and take action.

Here is the best part. She told me stories of a bunch of women who went into a forest that was slated to be cut down. They brought with them yarn and knitting needles. And they literally sat in circles and knitted cozies for all the trees. Sort of like big colorful afghans that wrapped around the ancient, marvelous trees. And you know what? When the chainsaws came, they couldn't cut down the trees because the yarn gummed up their engines. I have loved this story for years. I love that peaceful and creative resistance made tangible change in the world.

So, one way of thinking about Jesus as a lamb is to think that we worship what is soft and peaceful. And maybe that is part of the truth. But I also think that lambs produce wool, which makes yard, which in turn can gum up the teeth of chainsaws. So perhaps the Christian life isn't one of just peace and softness. Maybe it is also one of creative resistance to the forces in this life that destroy the children of God, threaten our peaceful society, our agency, and even the earth on which we live.

When I get on my knees and pray, I do not think about a king on a throne. We have tried that on earth time and time again, and without fail, violence follows kings. And I do not even spend a lot of time thinking about a shepherd, though perhaps that metaphor might work really well for you. I do, though, spend a decent amount of time thinking about God as a Lamb seated on a throne. I think about the Lamb as the antidote to what ails our hurting society and our hurting world. I think about the Lamb as a source of endless creativity and hope in the middle of despair. I think about the Lamb as a nexus of unexpected grace and, perhaps most importantly, creative resistance. So, my friends, whatever ails our society today, remember that wool can make a lovely three-season suit, but it can also gum up the works of chainsaws. The world will throw violence at you in some way or another, and the God that we gather to worship every Sunday has an answer. And that answer is a Lamb. Amen.