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Easter 4C
Peace, Seattle
April 25, 2010 epk
Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23,
Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

SHEPHERD, SHEEP, TEARS

Shepherds and sheep dot the landscape of our texts on this Good Shepherd Sunday.

They're there in the Shepherd's psalm, as we witness the Shepherd's care in guiding and protecting the flock, and leading them to abundant life.

They're there in the vision from Revelation, as that great multitude, robed in white, sings praises to the Lamb whose blood has washed them clean.

And they're there in Solomon's portico in Jesus' powerful promise:
MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE…AND NO ONE WILL SNATCH THEM OUT OF MY HAND.

Sheep and Shepherds—or rather ONE GOOD SHEPHERD and ONE TRUE LAMB—tie our texts together, giving us a powerful image for understanding just who it is we gather to worship on this day.

But this is not the only image connecting our readings.
There are tears in these texts, too, this morning.

Tears in the eyes of the women who hold up the handiwork of their beloved benefactor, Dorcas. Dorcas—who, like a shepherd, guided and provided for those widows, the last and least, who were to the eyes of the world, invisible…but not to her.

And there are tears, too, from that multitude beyond number who've survived the great ordeal; tears which, it's promised, will all be wiped away when the Lamb on the throne trades fleece for staff, to become a Shepherd once more, and guides them all to springs of living water.

HAVE NO FEAR LITTLE FLOCK, we'll sing as we come to the Table today, FOR THE FATHER HAS CHOSEN TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM, HAVE NO FEAR LITTLE FLOCK.

Shepherd, sheep, tears.

I met three people this week past, who were looking for a shepherd, and looking through tears.

The first was a young woman with a baby five-months-old at home—her first.
Her new vocation as mother has allowed her to see that the abusive relationship she's in must end. This time, she's determined to make it stick.

Her story has elements so much in common with others you and I know. And some of the quilts we bless today will be going out to women like her, who've sought refuge at Hickman House.

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The second encounter was with a young man I've gotten to know over the past four years.

During much of that time his family has moved from one crisis to another while living in one cheap motel after another. But—incredibly—in spite of this bleak legacy, he's managed to stay in school and maintain an honor student's GPA.

He road the bus twenty miles to tell me that his father, who he'd last seen half his life ago, had died suddenly, across the ocean, thousands of miles away. He wasn't sure what to feel. He needed to talk with somebody.

The third person I met is caring not only for her own children aged five and two, but for her ailing father, who's dying of lung cancer. Recently she lost her job; and now she's losing her house.

She's walking a tightrope, surviving on unemployment while locating a new place to live.

These stories just scratch the surface of what's out there.
Sometimes, I feel (and I imagine you do, too) feel so helpless in the face of the stories of disaster and brokenness I meet. And I have to say, LORD, I DON'T KNOW HOW TO WIPE AWAY THE TEARS OF THESE PEOPLE. BUT YOU DO.

LORD, I HAVEN'T A CLUE ABOUT HOW TO SHEPHERD THESE PEOPLE. BUT YOU DO.

And the Lord responds: TELL THEM THEY ARE NOT ALONE. TELL THEM I WALK BESIDE THEM IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH. TELL THEM THE PROMISE:

> THEY WILL HUNGER NO MORE, AND THIRST NO MORE;
> THE SUN WILL NOT STRIKE THEM, NOR ANY SCORCHING HEAT,
> FOR I, THE LAMB AT THE CENTER OF THE THRONE WILL BE THEIR SHEPHERD,
> AND WILL GUIDE THEM TO SPRINGS OF LIVING WATER,
> AND WILL WIPE AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM THEIR EYES. (Rev. 7:16-17)

When we encounter a person who's hit the wall, do I dare, do you dare, to utter the promise of Jesus: NO ONE WILL SNATCH THEM OUT OF MY HAND.

The truth is, at times these words of promise <u>themselves</u> have the power to console; to instill hope.

> SO SHALL MY WORD BE THAT GOES OUT FROM MY MOUTH; says the LORD;
> IT SHALL NOT RETURN TO ME EMPTY,
> BUT IT SHALL ACCOMPLISH THAT WHICH I PURPOSE,
> AND SUCCEED IN THE THING FOR WHICH I SENT IT. [Isaiah 55:11]

<u>But it's also true</u> that at times <u>a gesture, a sign accompanying those words</u> allows those words to penetrate in a way and to a depth that they <u>would not</u> or <u>could not</u> penetrate without it.

That's one reason we have an AGAPE FUND; to reach out with a concrete gesture that makes a real and immediate difference, and helps to turn a trajectory of despair toward hope.

And that's why the quilts and baby blankets and health kits and school kits we bless today are so very important.

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They are little words of promise incarnate. They provide a visible link; tangible support and aid to people we likely will never meet. And they allow us to express the calling we have received from the Good Shepherd to "feed my sheep." [John 21:15-19]

You ever wondered how many tears quilts like these have absorbed through the years?

In the spirit of Dorcas, in the spirit of resurrection, in the spirit of the Good Shepherd, we send them out today to do their work. God's work—our hands—Christ's promise made one. Amen.