

The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square
April 29, 2007 (The Fourth Sunday of Easter)
By the Reverend Meg Buerkel
“Big Rigs & Good Shepherds”

I have always been a ‘sucker’ for those quizzes in popular magazines... you know the ones with titles like ‘Is he boyfriend material?’ ‘Are you right-brained or left-brained?’ ‘Test your flirting style.’ Those quizzes where you answer a series of questions then add up the scores to discover some promised ‘truth.’

When I was in middle school, we took one of those quizzes in my physical education class – I think it was right after our unit on Hunter’s Safety. The test was designed to determine which profession best matched our abilities and affections. The questions were probably something like Do you like math or reading better? Do you like to travel to new places? Do you prefer to sit still or move around? We had to complete it on a ScanTron form (you know, ‘Using a No. 2 pencil, shade in the complete circle and make sure to erase any stray marks...’) I looked forward to getting back those results... this test was for real – I mean, they gave it to me in school, and the results were sent off somewhere to be tabulated. It had to be right. I had no idea what I wanted to be, and surely this test would give me the answer!

When the test results finally came back, my 13-year-old self was absolutely mortified to discover that my perfect occupation was that of a truck driver!

Now there is nothing wrong with driving trucks – one of my best friends drives trucks to supplement his work as a farmer – but driving trucks was NOT what I had in mind back in middle school. All of my stereotypes of truck drivers came tumbling out – frayed and faded overalls, netted baseball caps, sleeping in rigs parked in rest areas, paying quarters for water in public showers at truck stops... no way! Of course, I didn’t know then that my friend would be a truck driver –and he is normal, smart, fun. I didn’t know then that truck drivers are the most likely to stop to help you when your car breaks down. And I didn’t know then that truck drivers are probably among the safest drivers on our highways.

I only tell you this because I literally was racking my brain trying to think of a comparable occupation to shepherd in our day and time. Jesus used images familiar to his listeners, and I would wager that not many of us in this room know a shepherd personally. Our lack of familiarity with shepherds along with all the Biblical references to shepherds has romanticized this occupation in our minds. Not in a candlelight dinner sort of romantic way, rather, we have sentimentalized this age-old profession. Shepherds were employed to ensure that their goods got safely from one destination to another. Shepherds were always on the move – traveling from place to place – and weren't really able to call one place 'home'. Not only that, but they weren't always welcomed where they did stop. They worked long hours in all sorts of weather conditions. They generally worked alone. And they slept with their goods. Similar in many ways to today's truck drivers. Shepherds and truck drivers were necessary to the survival of society, but not particularly valued or esteemed.

I promise, even if some of you do call me 'pastor,' that I am not trying to correlate my current position with the one that test showed long ago! And I am certainly not advocating for a rewrite of Psalm 23 into the 'Lord is my Big Rig.' Nor do I want to rename Jesus the Good Trucker. But I do want to illustrate the ambiguous position that shepherds held in ancient Israel. They were necessary to, but not entirely a part of, society.

YET – Jesus uses that role to describe himself... a shepherd... the Good Shepherd. Willing to get down and dirty; willing to go the extra mile; willing to comfort and protect; willing to travel; willing to put in long hours... because his goods – his sheep – US – he loves. Jesus loves us.

In calling himself the Good Shepherd, he transforms a role that society deems as lowly. He also reminds us that other great leaders in our faith tradition also watched flocks: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David were all shepherds at some point in their lives. Then God took what was lowly and disregarded and made each of them forces to be reckoned with: leaders and prophets and poets that led people to God.

Transformation is a HUGE theme in our Holy Scriptures. The Creation Story is transformation from chaos to order; the story of the Exodus is transformation from slavery to freedom; the

Incarnation is the transformation of God to human flesh. Jesus' life and ministry transformed faith and religion by inviting the outsider in; the Crucifixion is transformed into the Resurrection; death is transformed to life; and our souls are revived as we move from despair to hope.

Transformation is what we – the Church – are called to as well. We are called to give voice to this message in the world around us. To speak hope where there is despair. To include those who are outcast. To liberate those who are imprisoned.

Remember that quiz and those questions we answer each time there is a baptism? Do you believe in God the Father? God the Son? God the Holy Spirit? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?

Our responses, our promises – I will, with God's help – in the Baptismal Covenant commit us to this work of transforming the world. Each of us has been given different gifts to help in bringing about this transformation – and each of us has different passions in which these gifts are best utilized. We are called to bring healing and wholeness into this aching world through prayer or presence or listening or medicine. We are called to care for the Creation that sustains us and enriches our lives.

We are called to work for the transformation of this world to a place where no one sleeps in anything other than a home; where no one is scared to walk down the street, to go to the market, or to go to school; and where no one has to choose between buying medicine or buying food. We are called to address the issues of poverty in meaningful ways; not just by applying band-aids but by addressing its root causes: poor education, poor nutrition, poor health care, poor job choices, poor housing opportunities. Like Jesus, the good Shepherd, we are called to stand in solidarity with the suffering.

As Christians, we are called to be Jesus in this world – we are the Body of Christ here and now sent to TRANSFORM the world here and now. All of us – doctors, lawyers, teachers, housewives, children, scientists, rich, poor, truck drivers, and shepherds – ALL of us -- are called to bring the good news of transformation to the

world. We are called to bring into reality that description of the Kingdom of God we heard in our second reading where ALL people, 'all tribes and nations and languages' will 'gather around the Lamb at the center of the throne [who is] their shepherd' and 'they will hunger no more and thirst no more... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

Amen.