

Sermon for 4 Easter C
Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham
April 25, 2010

On Thursday afternoon, as I was leaving the church, I saw Kevin, a resident of the Kendrick House next door, who had come over to share the meal at Good Shepherd's Table. We greeted each other and he then said to me, "God told me he wants to give you a hundred trillion wishes!" I thanked him very much for this message, and then got in my car and drove home.

What a great thought! I was struck by how happy this announcement made me. One hundred trillion wishes! The genie in the bottle only granted 3 wishes, and that always caused horrible trouble. Either people would waste wishes on the first thing that came to mind—a gold ring, something to eat—or else they would spend so much time trying to figure out what was most important that they would end up rashly wishing something in the heat of the moment—"I wish you'd shut up!" These stories never end up well.

But a hundred trillion wishes?! How could you go wrong? Even if you waste, oh, several billion wishes, you still have more than enough. Possibly after several million wishes, you might even get some wisdom about how best to spend them.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, the name day of this church and congregation. One of the most beautiful and well-loved pieces of Scripture is Psalm 23, the Psalm of the Good Shepherd. It is known by all Christians—and probably all Jews. It is often read at funerals. Perhaps the reason it is so loved is because it pictures the God of a Hundred Trillion Wishes. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want."

How many wishes do we spend every day on basic needs? Especially nowadays, many of worry about having enough money, about how stable our jobs are or when we'll get a job, whether we'll be able to pay the mortgage or rent, pay off debt, afford prescriptions or that dentist visit we keep putting off. We may not even be conscious of the constant wish-chatter going through our minds—"If only I had more money; I wish I had a job, a better job, a permanent job; how will I pay for a new transmission? I wish my I could get new clothes . . ." The Shepherd of Psalm 23 promises to take care of our basic needs, "He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters." Food and rest are promised to the sheep; still waters provide easy access to the drink they need. Food, drink, rest are all available, but the sheep are also provided with beauty—green pastures, still waters. Don't you wish you were there right now?

But there is more to life than just getting basic needs met. Researchers have studied the happiness level of different societies according to income levels, and what they have found is that, after a certain point, more money does not equate with increased happiness. In fact, this threshold of diminishing returns happens quite quickly. After a per capita income of about \$10,000 a year—basically, after people have enough for food and shelter—greater income has no effect on happiness. The Good Shepherd provides for more than just physical needs: "He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake."

The Good Shepherd nourishes our inner being—allowing us to experience joy, forgiveness, renewal—as he revives our souls. He also provides us with purpose and reason for being, guiding us along right pathways, doing work that builds up the Kingdom and glorifies God's name. He frees us from fears

that plague us, because we can rely on the Good Shepherd to be with us, even when we encounter terrible difficulties—even walking through “the valley of the shadow of death,” even being surrounded by “those who trouble me.”

Some of our hundred trillion wishes will be spent on being freed from inner torments, from fears, from guilt. Some of our hundred trillion wishes would be spent on finding the right path for our life, finding our joy in our calling, our mission, our service. Being the best sheep we can be, given what our special gifts and sheeplly abilities are. I can remember being in college and wondering what direction to go in my life—how would I know if it were right? Was there one correct path? If so, how would I find it? What if I missed it?

If you have a hundred trillion wishes, maybe not all of them are going to be the best things for us. Sheep don't always make the very best choices; that's why they need a shepherd. What we want may not be what God wants for us. I remember a story about a young girl, maybe six or seven years old. She wanted, more than anything else, one thousand dolls. Finally, she told her mother that she had decided to ask God for the one thousand dolls. The mother, being a woman of great wisdom, didn't tell her daughter that was a bad idea or selfish. She left her daughter ask. Later on, she inquired of her, “So, did God answer your prayer for a thousand dolls?” The girl answered, “Yes. He said NO!!”

We get to ask God for **anything** at any time. One hundred trillion wishes. But the Good Shepherd knows that some paths are better for us than others. That's why shepherds carry rods and staffs; the rods can be used to beat off wild animals that might harm the flock, but the staff has the hook on the end that can be used to catch a lamb before it falls off a cliff or drown in a stream. As we follow the Shepherd, we can wish for many things or turn off on many paths. But some desires take us on a path of life, and some take us into addiction, disease, or death. If we pay attention to the Shepherd, he leads us back into the path of life, honoring and supporting our wishes that lead to health, gently closing the door on wishes that lead to death.

I imagine that after a while, knowing that we have so many wishes with God, we could start using our wishes to agree with what God wants, and asking the kinds of questions God might ask. Will this lead to more life, more love, more health? How can I bring more mercy and justice into this situation? Who will help the hungry, the homeless, the hopeless?

Being a sheep does not mean doing things right all the time. It means trying to follow Jesus, the Shepherd. Because we have a hundred trillion wishes, we don't have to be perfect. When we fail, we always get another chance, another billion wishes. Isn't that a great thought? And we are surrounded by good things: when we are led by the Shepherd, “surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” Our backside is covered by goodness and mercy! And we get to live in God's house forever—our ultimate goal is to be with the Lord always.

When I was younger, I was bothered by the image of being a stupid sheep, needing to follow someone else. As I have gotten older, I have seen the wisdom and attraction of this image. Indeed, following Jesus takes an enormous amount of trust and courage, but it also frees us up to be part of something so much larger, sweeter, and powerful than anything we could do on our own. We can rest easy that we will never use up God's willingness to love us and guide us. Even our hundred trillion wishes wouldn't exhaust the Shepherd's love for us. And we can use our wishes for true God—the ultimate matching granter, if you will.

This is the Church of the Good Shepherd. This church has a heart for serving God's people, for going after the hungry, the tired, the hurt sheep. But the message of the psalm is also for us, the ones trying to serve. The shepherd provides the green pastures and the still waters. But we are also the sheep—and we need to eat, drink, and rest at the hand of the Shepherd. We aren't after all the shepherd, just fellow sheep. The shepherd is the Savior; we're not. We can help, but only at the Shepherd's leading.

Even here at the Church of the Good Shepherd, our fundamental calling is to be a sheep. Following the shepherd. I hope that this church never loses its passion for serving the poor and being involved in the community. But here is where we are fed, **so that** we can serve. Without the feeding and leading, we are just busy people.

What are you going to do with your hundred trillion wishes? Come, the Shepherd will supply all you need. AMEN.