Fourth Week of Easter
Sermon for April 13, 2008
Raymond Raney

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

I've always found it a little disconcerting thinking about the gospels and their language of shepherds and sheep in the middle of cattle country.

I'm sure that when Luke was writing the passage in the Acts of the Apostles that we read today he had a vision of what it was like out here where those who ranched cattle got along so famously with those who herded sheep.

What must it have been like for cattlemen to go to church and listen to readings and sermons that talked about the Great Shepherd and the Lamb of God? It must have been a difficult situation to preach that their savior was a sheepherder. Did ministers of those churches modify the language and change the words? I don't know. Does it quite sound the same to think of the Great Cattle Baron in the sky, or the Calf of God.

But it was no different in the first century. For Jesus to talk about himself as the Shepherd of the sheep was not the pleasing pastoral image that we associate with shepherds. Sheep smell. They're disagreeable. They are contrary. And shepherds were the lowest of the low. They were not allowed to associate with most people because they smelled of sheep. Just as Luke chose those of lowly state to be the ones to greet the newborn Jesus, so Jesus is underlining the role of servant by aligning himself with those who would not be allowed in most people's homes.

And if that were not enough, in today's Gospel, Jesus has made salvation dependent on entering the sheepfold – to be one with the sheep. Jesus so aligns himself with the metaphor he uses that he becomes not only the shepherd, but his is the gate, the gatekeeper, and the shepherd.

So totally does Jesus identify with the image that he also becomes the lamb, the lamb who is slain to save the world from death.

Lambs are really cute. I remember my mother telling the story of when she was a little girl on the farm, her father raised sheep for awhile. And one spring he gave her a lamb, which she named and raised like a pet. The lamb had the run of the house. Then one day my grandfather told her it was time to say goodbye to the lamb because he was going to be Sunday dinner.

Well, my mother was upset. Not only that, she began screaming and yelling and demanding that this not be true. Then she started crying. And she cried and cried.
In the end, her lamb was saved.

As for the rest of the sheep, my grandfather had to stop raising them because my mother started naming them, and he could see what was coming. So they were sold, and cows took their place.

As for my mother's lamb, it stayed around the farm house for some years, and finally died of old age.

As for my grandfather, he was never much of a cattleman. His cows became something of his pets. I remember visiting him several times growing up, and when he walked the field he would talk and the cows would come running because they knew his voice. I think he named them, too.

Jesus knew the power of the voice. He tells us that in the Gospel today. "the sheep here his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. … the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

We are each here because we have heard the Shepherd's voice call our name. We come together to feed the hunger we have for his return, to hear his approval of what we have done in our lives.

Jesus calls us each by name, and leads us "along right pathways." Sometimes we get lost and forget to listen, and wander off. But we need only stop and think and then listen for the voice that will call us back.

That is the promise. No matter how far we wander, we are called back because we are his, and he knows us by name. We need only follow his voice and hear his words, once again. "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly."

Amen.