

Fourth Weekend of Easter (B/RCL)
John 10.11-18
“Good Shepherd and Good-Enough Sheep”
May 2-3, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

War generates strange stories. Some are horrible, some are wonderful, some are amazing. I have such a story to tell you today, one that comes from a book I read recently: *Operation Drumbeat* by Michael Gannon (NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990). Its subtitle is *The Dramatic True Story of Germany's First U-Boat Attacks Along the American Coast in World War II*. It's especially interesting because our Jersey Shore is involved, and our local communities and the Manasquan Coast Guard station are mentioned.

Something I'm pretty sure I never learned in my American history classes is that in the first six months of 1942 a small fleet of German U-boats sank almost 400 ships off our Atlantic coast, in the Gulf of Mexico and in the Caribbean. Those events have been called There was one U-boat (sub) that outshone all the others: *Untersee Boot Ein Zwei Drei* (123), under the command of a German naval officer named Reinhard Hardegen. As a U-boat commander, Hardegen directed the sinking of 25 ships, totaling over 136 tons of cargo.

Most of *Operation Drumbeat* deals with the sinking of ships and the politics on both sides of the Atlantic that created what has been called the U.S.'s greatest naval disaster ever, an “Atlantic Pearl Harbor” (xviii). But one story is about salvation in the middle of the sea from an unexpected source.

The *Pan Norway* was an empty Norwegian tanker headed to Aruba to take on a load of aviation fuel and deliver it to Great Britain. U-Boat 123 torpedoed and sank it. Some survivors were able to launch 2 lifeboats; others jumped into the water and clung to life preservers or floating debris. They saw the sub surface and continue to shoot at the *Pan Norway* till her bow rose up, slid down and disappeared beneath the waves. Then they saw *Eins Zwei Drei* come in

their direction, and their hearts froze. One of those men was Wilfred Larsen of Bergen, Norway.

Forty years later he recalled:

I was petrified when the U-boat came toward us. The sight of that dark monster I shall never forget. Nor will I forget the emotions that filled me during those long seconds when I felt sure I was about to die. I was barely twenty years old. I had not seen enough of the world. I had not had many experiences. It did not seem fair that I should die at that moment. (p. 290)

Then the U-boat sailed away, allaying the drifting seamen's fears of being strafed by machine guns, but not of dying on the open ocean.

Here's the amazing part. The U-boat then proceeded to another ship, not to sink it but to seek help for the survivors. It found the *Mount Aetna*, a neutral ship sailing under the Swiss flag. Seeing the U-boat headed her way, she ran, until the U-boat pursued and used Morse code to ask the ship to stop, which she did. Hardegen, the German captain, requested that the Swiss pick up the survivors of the *Pan Norway*. They did pick up the two lifeboats full of men. Hardegen then retraced his steps, and found another survivor floating in the water. He picked him up and transported him to the Swiss ship, which was desperate to leave the area, for fear another U-boat wouldn't realize they were neutral and torpedo them. Hardegen convinced the captain of the *Mount Aetna* to return to the area where the *Pan Norway* had sunk and to pick up other men he knew to still be in the water. Hardegen's unexpected act of compassion saved other 30 lives. As U-boat *Ein Zwei Drei* pulled away, the survivors of the *Pan Norway* lined the decks of the *Mount Aetna*, waving goodbye and thanks. On that day, January 27, 1942, Reinhard Hardegen, the commander of a sea wolf, a submarine, served as a shepherd, a savior, for those survivors.

It's not a perfect analogy for the Good Shepherd, by any stretch of the imagination. Jesus doesn't terrorize the sheep before saving them, doesn't push them to the brink before bringing them back from the edge of oblivion. My point, though, is that we have **one** Good Shepherd, and **many** imperfect sheep, including ourselves, who can serve Him and His other sheep as God gives us opportunity.

The Greek word that's translated "good" in the title "Good Shepherd" is *kalos*. It can mean "beautiful" as in *calligraphy*, literally *beautiful writing*, and as in *calisthenics*, literally meaning *beautiful strength*. *Kalos* can also be translated "ideal" as in "You're a good role model," **and** it can mean "devoted" as in "You're a good mother (or father)."

Jesus is the Good Shepherd because He lays down His life for the sheep. Others have been willing to lay down their lives for others. Another imperfect shepherd figure from World War II was Oskar Schindler, whom the book and movie *Schindler's List* has made famous. Herr Schindler was a hard-drinking, womanizing, unethical businessman/industrialist, who risked his life to save Jews by giving them work in his factories and paying for their protection. If he'd been caught, he would have been hanged or shot. The movie begins with a quote from the Talmud: *To save one life is to save the world entire*. Schindler, whom most people felt tipped the scales more toward sinful than saintly qualities, saved over 1,000 lives, at the potential cost of his own. Is there any doubt the Good Shepherd was motivating and blessing him??

There is one Good Shepherd, but there are many good-enough followers through whom He looks after the rest of the flock. The pediatrician D.W. Winnicott, whom some of you have studied about in child psychology courses, coined the phrase "good-enough" mothering. "Good-enough" may sound like the description of mediocre performance, but it's not. Winnicott wanted to remind mothers (and all parents) that no one can parent perfectly, but that shouldn't make us despair of our kids turning out to be bums. He said although we can't be unconditionally accepting of our children 24/7, although we won't always be the best role models around the clock for all aspects of self-care, although we'll inevitably say things we shouldn't, do **less** than we should for our children sometimes, and **more** than we should for our children at other times, it's okay. As long as we help them feel loved and secure and valuable more often than not, the other wrinkles will fall out in time.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, not the Good-enough Shepherd. He's got a perfect track record of providing for all our needs, leading us to green pastures and beside still waters, anointing our head with oil, and filling our cup to overflowing. He's the One who lay down His life to save ours. Ultimately He's the One who saved Wilfred Larsen in the middle of the Atlantic in 1942, who'd helped him mobilize to escape from shipboard imprisonment in 1941, and who lovingly watched over him during an abusive childhood. Our Good Shepherd is unique in that He not only lay down His life for us, He was able to overcome death. That is why He is Savior and not just saver or life-preserver.

Reinhard Hardegen, Oskar Schindler and we are not "good" as Jesus is good, but by the Spirit's power we can be good-enough followers of the Good Shepherd, good enough that He may use to bless the flock. Don't despair because you don't follow perfectly! Rejoice because He can use you, me, every one of us, in all our lost-at-sea-ness and in all our imperfection. Amazingly, He **chooses** not just to save us but to use us to "save" others. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham