

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Easter 4
May 3, 2020

WHY SHEEP? John 10:1-10

Today is sometimes called “Sheep Sunday” by preachers, because on this 4th Sunday of Easter every year the Readings all talk about sheep; John’s description of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and the Psalmist’s song, The LORD Is My Shepherd.” So, I wondered out loud to myself, as I read these words, Why sheep?

Why not eagles? Why not think of you and me as eagles in a gorgeous blue sky, instead of sheep in some muddy pasture. Isaiah writes: “They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be faint.” Isaiah 40:31 That sounds good – that’s why we see these words inscribed on tombstones in many cemeteries. Why not call you and me eagles? **Why sheep?**

Then I got honest, and thought maybe it’s because the prayer of confession got it right: “We have erred and strayed from God’s ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts...” and so forth and so on.

We seldom soar like eagles; we often act like sheep. As the song puts it:

We are poor little lambs who have lost our way, Baa! Baa! Baa!
We’re little black sheep who’ve gone astray, Baa! Baa! Baa!
Gentlemen-songsters out on a spree, damned from here to eternity,
God have mercy on such as we, Baa! Baa! Baa!

Most of us are old enough to remember that as the “Whiffenpoof Song,” popularized in the 30’s, 40’s, and 50’s by the singer Rudy Vallee. It was originally part of a poem by Rudyard Kipling. And I thought it would make a great prayer of confession, if we could sing it or say it with a straight face.

But whatever our words, our confession is still only a refrain to our lives, as Kipling’s words are only the refrain to his poem. We have erred and strayed like lost sheep. I know that. You know that. The Bible knows that, and uses that as a metaphor for the reality of our lives. Lives we live together in our families, at our work, in our community, in this church every day.

And it’s in our lives lived together that the Frugal Gourmet, Jeff Smith, sees explaining why the biblical metaphor for you and me is “sheep.” In one of his books he serves up some wonderful sounding recipes for lamb chops, grilled, with mint and cinnamon, in grape leaves; and lamb stew with figs and wine. He says the sheep metaphor finds its meaning in the fact that “sheep are communal by their very nature. (Pointing out that) as a matter of fact we do not even have a word for one sheep. The term is always understood to be plural.”

I’m skeptical of anyone who writes of the love of God for his “sheep,” and how to cook lamb chops, in the same book. But maybe the Frugal Gourmet, who happens to be a Methodist minister, as well as a good cook, is right. The meaning of the metaphor is simply that you and I together, like sheep – plural – are a community, a flock of faith in which we are cared for by God, as a shepherd

cares for his sheep, and that's what God intends. We're in it together, and together we are Shepherded by Jesus Christ.

That's a good corrective to the excessive individualism of our day that leaves so many of us feeling very much alone in the presence of almighty God. More like a sheep at the mercy of a predator, than a lamb in God's arms of protection.

Protection provided in Jesus' story by the sheep being together in the sheepfold – not just in his willingness to run around willy-nilly to find them.

The 19th century theologian, Benjamin Warfield, whose work was to have great influence on the original fundamentalists, apparently considered this to be fundamental: “That in Jesus Christ, God was saving the world and not merely one individual here and there out of the world. That in Jesus Christ God came as a shepherd, to his sheep.

The children's poem says, Mary had a “little lamb.” And the classic picture of Jesus, the good shepherd, has him carrying a single lamb on his shoulders. But the biblical picture has him surrounded by an uncountable herd of sheep.

To paraphrase the children's book by Wanda Gag, there are sheep here, sheep there, sheep and little lambs everywhere, hundreds of sheep, thousands of sheep, millions and billions and trillions of sheep. All being sheep and all in need of a shepherd.

So, Charles Cousar writes, “the language in John's Gospel is reminiscent of the Twenty-third Psalm. What is eloquently sung there about the Lord's care,

guidance, and protection of the flock, is here in John's Gospel reaffirmed in terms of Jesus."

It's that in the togetherness, sure it's possible to encounter Christ anywhere, but the biblical witness is that that encounter is most likely to happen in a place where people are gathered to worship and break bread. "I'll say to be shepherded by the One who calls himself the Good Shepherd. People gathered, like sheep in a sheepfold are those most likely to encounter the shepherd. People gathered like sheep in a sheepfold can be shepherded – brought together in the warmth and the safety of life together. Yes, the Good Shepherd goes after one lost sheep – but why" – to return him to the fold, to the flock.

The book called *Approved Practices in Sheep Production* says that in caring for sheep, "most important is that...continuous attention is required. Sheep are often quite helpless and fall prey to predators, especially dogs, coyotes, foxes, bobcats, and eagles. They might even fall prey to such hazards as picket fences, or to ditches and gullies in which they might lie and suffocate unless aid came quickly. Parasites and disease are also ever-present problems to guard against.

The book says sheep have a lot of problems. So do we. The book says sheep face a lot of dangers. So do we. The book says sheep are best tended together. So are we, says the book we call the Bible with its image of God as our Shepherd.

But what about me? Well, what about me? The image of the sheepfold and you and me as the sheep is not intended to make us feel sheepish, or to make us feel

individually unimportant.; rather it is intended to reinforce the importance of all of us to the Shepherd who is God in Jesus Christ. The sheepfold, then, while constraining and confining and sometimes crowded is not claustrophobic. Rather, by setting limits on how far we can stray, and what can get at us, it frees us to live as God intends: to live each day to the fullest – what Jesus meant when he said, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly. I came so that everyone would have life, and have it to the fullest.”

Some of the fullest moments in my ministry have been the moments filled by many of you. There is a poem called “Live Each Day to The Fullest,” and describes what life lived that way – what Jesus called the abundant life – might look like.

Live each day to the fullest.

Get the most from each hour, each day, and each age of your life.

Then you can look forward with confidence and back without regrets.

Be yourself – but be your best self.

Dare to be different and to follow your own star.

And don't be afraid to be happy.

Enjoy what is beautiful.

Live with all your heart and soul.

Believe that those you love, love you.

Learn to forgive yourself for your faults,

for this is the first step in learning to forgive others.

Listen to those whom the world may consider uninteresting,

for each person has, in himself/herself something of worth.

Disregard what the world owes you, and concentrate on what you owe the world.

Forget about what you have done for your friends, and remember what they have done for you.

No matter how troublesome the cares of life may seem to be at times,
This is still a beautiful world - and you are at home in it,
as a child is at home in their parents' house.

When you are faced with a decision,

Make that decision as
wisely as possible – then forget it.

The moment of absolute certainty never arrives;

Act as if everything depended upon you, and

Pray as if everything depended upon God.

If you live like that, if I live like that, if we live like that together, and even when we don't live like that, or think we can't live like that, we can depend upon God, the Good Shepherd, whom we know in Jesus Christ, our Shepherd, who is well described in the shepherd David's most famous Psalm.

You, LORD, are my Shepherd

I will never be in need.

You let me rest in fields of green grass.

You lead me to streams of peaceful water,
and you refresh my life.

You are true to your name,

And you lead me along the right paths.

I may walk through valleys as dark as death,

But I won't be afraid.

You are with me,

and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe.

You treat me to a feast

while my enemies watch.

You honor me as your guest,

And you fill my cup until it overflows.

Your kindness and love will always be with me

each day of my life,

And I will live forever in your house, O Lord. Psalm 23 (CEV)

Without fail, when someone has died someone will say, “Please read Psalm 23.

What the Bible says is live that – every day! In this world where the closest most of us ever get to a sheep is a book, or the wool in our suits, our skirts, our slacks, or our socks, we still need a shepherd – to lead us and guide us and occasionally prod us in the way we should go. And the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for the life of the sheep, for your life and mine, that we might live and have life abundantly, is Jesus Christ.