

There is a fair amount of talk in the Bible about sheep and shepherds going all the way back to Moses. Remember how he is keeping watch of his father-in-law's flocks out in Midian when "I AM" encounters and calls him at the burning bush? And then there is the shepherd-king, David, whom we first meet when Samuel shows up at his dad's house in Bethlehem looking for a new king, even before there is a vacancy on the throne! In Luke's Gospel it's the shepherds who are the first to hear of the birth of the messiah—they are out keeping watch of their flocks by night when an angel of the Lord appears and says, "do not be afraid, for behold, I bring good news of a great joy..."

This fourth Sunday of the Easter Season is sometimes called "Good Shepherd Sunday." What strikes me, though, is that outside of the world of the Bible—in the world where we live and work and play—most of us here don't have much day-to-day contact with the shepherding world. Although I must tell you that this past Easter we bought our leg of lamb from a local farmer just over the line into Princeton and I found myself walking into the barn during the lambing season and realizing that world isn't nearly so far away from the metropolis of Holden that I sometimes think it is.

Still, the point remains: we live in a global economy, a fast-paced world shaped by the Internet and text-messaging. When we call for help to trouble-shoot a problem with our computers we may find ourselves talking to someone in India. There is a temptation that goes in two very different directions given our cultural distance from shepherding. On the one hand we may feel a kind of nostalgia for an agrarian age of innocence: we imagine the America of our grandparents and great-grandparents to be a much simpler time and place and may even see technology as the enemy. If our lives weren't so busy, *then* we would have time for God. Conversely, we may succumb to a temptation of pride and think that because we have more stuff and quicker access to information, that we are somehow smarter than our ancestors were about the ways of God and the world. Instead of making technology the enemy, we think it makes talk of God seem childish and obsolete.

I'm an Episcopalian so I'm not big on either/or options. I think that the truth is that while cultures change people are basically people. And that these are simply *different* worlds, each with its own challenges and its joys. The challenge for us as twenty-first century Christians is that we come through these doors in the midst of our busy lives. The bulletin reminds us to turn off our cell phones so we can be still for a little while to know that God is God—and also because it's embarrassing if our cell phone starts ringing during the sermon and everyone starts looking at us. So we get ourselves all settled in and the readings all deal with sheep and shepherds. I think it's normal to ask: what on earth does Good Shepherd Sunday have to do with us?

For the people who first told these stories not a week could go by, or even a day, when they didn't have contact with sheep and shepherds. I remember even back in 1983 when I traveled in Israel how shocked I was to see sheep everywhere. The Bible is rooted in people's everyday experience of the world: sheep and goats, baking bread and planting gardens, tending a vineyard or making wine. Yet because most of us have very limited experience with that world it is sometimes hard to make sense of it all. One of the goals for us, I think, is to discover new ways of talking about God and seeing God at work in the world that remain rooted in the example

Scripture sets. For us it might be finding ways to speak that come from the perspective of a nurse on an Alzheimer's floor or a banker trying to figure out how to make good loans in tough economic times or a teacher in a classroom of people who may not immediately grasp why studying ancient Egypt has any bearing on their lives.

But it is also to try to imagine our way into that world of the Bible so we can hear what is happening there, so that we can hear a Word of the Lord and that Word can begin to work on us and heal us and even transform us. One image we probably all do bring with us into this worship service today comes to us from one of the parables of Jesus. Jesus is talking with the tax collectors and sinners when the scribes and Pharisees come grumbling. They don't like it that Jesus is so indiscriminate about the company he keeps. So Jesus tells them three parables that are intended to help them to see the world from another perspective—by imagining what it feels like to be lost. He tells them the story of the ninety-nine sheep and the one who gets lost. Remember? And the shepherd goes out to find the lost sheep and bring it back to the flock. And then he tells the story about the woman who loses a coin in her house and turns the whole house upside down until she finds it. And then as he builds to a crescendo he tells the story about the man who had two sons and one of them lost his way, the story we sometimes call the Parable of the Prodigal Son. All three stories: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son are offered as a kind of legal defense by Jesus. He spends his time with sinners and tax collectors because he sees them not as *bad* people to be shunned but as *lost* people who are yearning to be found.

It's from the first of those three parables that most of us can probably see in our mind's eye an image of the "good shepherd" carrying back a wayward little lamb to re-join the rest of the flock. This image is a powerful one, and you don't need to live on a farm in Princeton to recognize that there is good news in it. I sometimes even wonder if it isn't easier to get lost in our fast-paced world in front of a computer screen or tethered to a blackberry than in an agrarian society. In every time and place, God seeks out the lost ones and binds up their wounds and makes them strong again. The 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm touches on that journey of faith which is about overcoming fear—even our fear of death.

It's great to be among the ninety-nine and feel plugged in and connected and munch on good grass all day. But sometimes we are that one who feels lost and confused and scared. And when you feel lost and confused and scared it can become a vicious cycle, because it seems so obvious that everybody else must be found and put together and happy. So maybe you wander a bit further away even, until you are *more* lost and *more* scared and *more* confused. Pretty soon you may even find yourself walking through the valley of the shadow of death. But God doesn't give up on us even then; especially then. God goes out on a search and rescue mission, and by the grace of God we may even allow ourselves to be found.

The imagery in the tenth chapter of John's Gospel draws on this same life experience with shepherding and sheep but comes at it from the other side. The Good Shepherd is still Jesus, the risen Christ. But the perspective is from the other side of the equation: rather than the one who is lost and needs to be carried back to join the rest we see why it is important to be part of the ninety-nine. It's talking about why being part of a flock matters in the first place. The larger goal of keeping the flock together is simple: it's a dangerous world and one little lamb off by herself is likely to become a leg of lamb dinner for a hungry wolf family.

A week from today when our bishop comes here for confirmation he will process down the aisle singing the first hymn and carrying his staff, his “shepherd’s crook.” The rounded part, I’m told, worked well for shepherds trying to pull sheep by the neck who didn’t want to be found. But the long straight part was used as a weapon to beat up on hungry wolves. Now I know someone is going to come up to me after this sermon and tell me wolves have an unfairly negative image and they are really beautiful creatures and I do know that. I even remember reading the story of *The Three Little Pigs* by A. Wolfe to my kids when they were little—the familiar story as told by the wolf who claims to have had a hacking cough that day when he was huffing and puffing and the house made of straw and the one made of sticks *accidentally* got blown over. It was all a horrible misunderstanding.

Fair enough. But it’s also a dog-eat-dog world or to be more precise, if you make a living as a shepherd then you know well that it’s a wolf-eat-lamb world. The good shepherd’s job is to keep the wolves away, even the ones who like to dress up in sheep’s clothing and pretend to be something they are not. *A flock that is together is safer than a flock that is disbursed.* And that is the key to understanding what Jesus is talking about in today’s gospel reading. A flock that is together can be led to greener pastures and still waters and the wolves can be kept at a distance and therefore they can all have more abundant life.

Sometimes people tell me they are very good Christians who don’t need the church to practice their faith and I have no reason to doubt their sincerity, even if they sometimes do seem a tad bit defensive. But we really are made to part of a flock—members of Christ’s Body, the Church. Yes, community can be hard. But even at it is most challenging, healthy communities give us a space to grow into the full stature of Christ that privatized faith can never offer us.

At the heart of this powerful metaphor about the Good Shepherd is a claim about what the church is for and a reminder that we need one another, and when we make time for each other to gather and to reflect on God’s Word and break the bread and share the cup we give ourselves a much better chance of staying well in body, mind and spirit. The church is crazy sometimes, no doubt. And sometimes people have issues and agendas and old wounds that are still infected. So trying to work through all of that junk requires work, and who needs more work when our lives are way to busy as it is? So let’s be clear: community takes work. But so do marriages and parenting and friendships. But it is good for our spiritual health to make time to be together. It’s good for our spiritual health to assess where we are from time to time and figure out where God is leading us—especially when there are greener pastures and more still waters ahead. Sometimes the Good Shepherd says “follow me” to that new place and we just say “baah.” But the call of this day is for trust to trump fear.

Through Holy Baptism we *are* part of *this* fold. Sometimes we get lost and go astray. But each week we are called to come back together so that we can give ourselves a better chance of being found by the love of God that casts out all fear—a love that forms us as an Easter people. Apparently the Good Shepherd has other flocks as well—that recognize his voice even if they do not know his name. I like that. But for those of us who gathered here, the goal is to listen for his voice as he calls us by name—and to respond as Thomas did with Easter faith: “my Lord and my God!” That is good news in every time and place.