

SLD04.13.08 Fourth Easter
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 10:1-10
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“The Good Shepherd”

Surely one of the most beloved images or metaphors for Jesus is that of the good Shepherd, the One who looks out for his flock, who protects and guides them, feeds and nurtures them, and keeps them from harm. We followers of Jesus are, of course, his beloved flock, the ones he works to protect and guide and lead and feed.

In the Hebrew scriptures, God is likewise often pictured as the shepherd, and the people, as God's flock. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” reads the 23rd Psalm. “We your people, the flock of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever,” reads Psalm 79. “The Lord is our God and we are the people of God's pasture, and the sheep of God's hand,” says Psalm 95. The prophet Isaiah describes the Messiah to come as the One who “will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” (Is. 40:11)

This pastoral imagery of God and the Messiah passes over into the new Testament with Jesus as the shepherd who, in Matthew (18:12) and Luke (15:4), will risk his life to seek and save that one sheep who has strayed away. The one who in the gospel of Mark (6:34), has pity on the people because they are as sheep without a shepherd. And who, in I Peter, is the shepherd and guardian of our souls. Jesus as The Good Shepherd is a common metaphor to us, in scripture and out; so common, in fact, that we almost take for granted this gentle Jesus who tends to our everyday needs.

But in today's text a not-so-gentle Jesus opens by naming as thieves and robbers those who sneak into the sheepfold by any means other than the gate. Defending against interlopers is only one of the tough jobs of a shepherd, but it's a full time one. Only the shepherd of the sheep and the sheep themselves are allowed enter by the gate of the sheepfold. And the gatekeeper is the one who decides who gets to come in and out. The gatekeeper opens the gate only for the shepherd, and to those sheep who recognize his voice. Others call to the sheep, but Jesus' sheep run from their voices. Others sneak in the sheepfold, but only to do harm, and the shepherd defends against them.

If this metaphor is common and easy for us to understand, imagine how accessible it was to those of the first century middle eastern Semitic culture, many of whose very livelihood depended upon the sheep business.

"The main part of Judea, you see, is a central plateau. It stretches from Bethel to Hebron for a distance of about 35 miles, and varies from about 14 to 17 miles across. The ground, for the most part, is rough and stony. Judea was, therefore, naturally much more a pastoral than an agricultural country. One of the most familiar figures of the Judean uplands was the shepherd.

"In Palestine no flock ever grazes without a shepherd, and the shepherd is never off duty. There is little grass, and the sheep are bound to wander far afield. There are no protecting walls, and the sheep have ever to be watched. On either side of the narrow plateau the ground dips sharply down to the craggy deserts and the sheep are always liable to wander away and get lost.

“The shepherd’s task is constant and dangerous as he protects the sheep not only from the treacherous terrain but from wild animals and from thieves and robbers. For us the word ‘shepherd’ paints a picture of the unceasing vigilance and patience and protection of the love of God through Jesus. So when Jesus calls himself the ‘good shepherd,’ we imagine we know what he means.”¹

But if the meaning of this figure of speech is so apparent to us who hang not a whit with sheep, why is it such a stretch for Jesus’ first listeners, which scripture says ‘did not understand what he was saying to them?’

Jesus tries again. “Okay, never mind the shepherd metaphor. Think of me as the gate for the sheep. I am that gate, the one that lets the sheep in and out. The sheep come in by me, and they’re safe. They go out by me, and they get fed. Get it? Everyone else who tries to get the sheep’s attention, their aim is to steal and kill and destroy. Me, I’m the gate the flock goes in and out so they can live, and live abundantly.”

Perhaps this more direct “I am” statement gained more purchase with Jesus’ first listeners, if not with us. We may be going, ‘wait a minute: First Jesus is the shepherd the gatekeeper lets in, then he’s the shepherd leading the sheep out, then he’s the gate itself? Is that meant to be a kind of first century religious koan – translated today into something like ‘Jesus is the GPS system, and the road, and the destination...and the officer at the toll booth?’” Could be. Though insight into the shepherding practices of the day might lend more insight.

“The Palestinian shepherd had different ways of doing things from shepherds of say, Great Britain. In Britain the sheep are largely kept for killing but in Palestine the

¹ The Gospel of John, Vol. 2, William Barclay, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1956. pp. 62-63.

sheep are more often kept for their fleece for making wool. Therefore, in Palestine, the sheep are often with the shepherd for years.” Instead of dogs to help round up the sheep, the Palestinian shepherd used his sling to pop a rock just in front of a straying sheep’s nose to redirect him. He used his staff, which was a wooden club sometimes studded with nails, to protect the sheep against marauding beasts and robbers. And he used his rod, something like a shepherd’s crook, to catch and pull back any sheep which was straying away. And at the end of the day, when the sheep were going into the fold, the Palestinian shepherd held his rod across the entrance, quite close to the ground so that, as each sheep passed under the rod, the shepherd could examine it to see if it had received any injuries throughout the day.²

In Palestine the sheep sure enough knew and understood the eastern shepherd’s voice, and never answered to the voice of a stranger. One H. V. Morton describes latter-day Palestinian shepherds talking to their sheep “in a loud sing-song voice, using a weird language unlike anything Morton had ever heard in his life. He tells of a scene that he saw in a cave near Bethlehem. Two shepherds had sheltered their flocks in the cave during the night. How were the flocks to be sorted out? One of the shepherds stood some distance away and gave his peculiar call which only his sheep know, and soon his whole flock had run to him.”³

In Palestine, the shepherd did go *before* the sheep, not behind as in Britain, to make sure the path was safe. And the sheep did follow him.

In today’s passage there are two different sheep-folds to which Jesus refers. In the villages there were communal sheep-folds where all the village flocks were

² Ibid. p. 64.

³ Ibid. p. 65

sheltered at night. These folds were protected by a strong door of which only the guardian of the door, or the gatekeeper held the key.

But when the sheep were out on the hill in the warm season, they were collected into open spaces protected by a short wall but with no gate. At night the shepherd himself lay down across the entrance so that no sheep could get out or in except over his body. In the most literal sense then, the shepherd was the gate and there was no access to the sheep-fold except through him.

“I am the gate,” says Jesus. “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and whoever goes out will find pasture.”

The ability to go “in and out” unmolested is scripture’s way of describing a life that is absolutely secure and safe. In and out of one’s home, in and out of one’s city, in and out of one’s country. Remember Psalm 121? “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.”

“Follow me,” says Jesus. “Listen to my voice, and I will protect your going out and your coming in. I will feed you and give you rest, and you will experience a new sense of safety and security in life. And more that safety and security, you will experience the life abundant.”

Still, you know how the hymn goes: “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.” Despite the Shepherd’s incessant calling and leading and opening and nurturing, we too often clueless sheep still tend to wander far afield.

One way to set recalcitrant sheep on the right path if you’re the kind of shepherd that leads from the back, is to send a sheep dog to bark at them or nip at their heels. Or you can whack them from behind with a stick.

But who of us is not better drawn forward by love than pushed from behind by duty? St. Augustine said that we are better moved toward Christ by delight: delight in the truth...delight in blessedness...delight in justice...delight in peace and rest and hope. “Show me a lover and he knows what I’m talking about,” said Augustine. “Show a green bough to a sheep, and you draw it after you.”

Father John LaFarge tells the story of visiting the Assisi hillside with a friend.⁴ As they were walking along, they came upon an old shepherd who was unsuccessfully trying to drive a sheep along by whacking it on its rear. LaFarge broke off a leafy apple bough, gave it to the shepherd, and told him to wave it before the sheep. The sheep began to follow the shepherd, and off they went.

“The beauty, truth and goodness of the risen Christ delights and attracts us, and compels us to follow.”⁵

Many of you know that the retreat center I visit as often as I can is called Green Bough. Green Bough House of Prayer. It got its name from not from scripture but from a Chinese proverb that says, “If I keep a green bough in my heart, the singing bird will come.” In a recent Green Bough newsletter, spiritual director Fay Key wrote, “Christ is the green bough who draws us to God. And by extension we’re all meant to be green boughs who, in our living, show forth the love, beauty, goodness and truth of Christ in a way that draws others to God.”

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who calls, feeds, protects and leads his sheep. And when we wander, as we can’t seem to help doing, the Good Shepherd does not send guilt to nip our heels, or shame to redirect our wandering. He pings little reminders right

⁴ *The Manner Is Ordinary*, John LaFarge.

⁵ Green Bough House of Prayer Newsletter, Summer 2007.

before our nose to catch our attention to the delectable, irresistible green boughs he's waving to draw us back onto the path to the heart of God. We know his voice. It's easy to recognize. Whatever is beautiful, whatever is true, whatever is good...whatever opens your heart, and fills, and nourishes it, whatever gives you peace, whatever heals your spirit, this is the voice of Good Shepherd calling you and me to abundant life. Listen for it. Trust it. Follow it. And it will lead you home.

To the glory of God. Amen.