

30th January, 2022

“I AM the Good Shepherd”

Bible Reading: John 10:11-18

Among the “I Am” sayings in John’s Gospel, I particularly love “I am the Good Shepherd” There is a tenderness and love in it that appeals to both children and adults. One of the earliest images in Christian art is that of a shepherd, gently carrying a sheep across his shoulders.

In some communities of faith, the Lectionary (That is the set readings for each Sunday) have a Good Shepherd Sunday, usually the fourth Sunday of Easter, this year it is celebrated on May 8th.

The image of Jesus as our good shepherd, is such a familiar one. But I have to wonder: is it still of help to us? It is rather old fashioned, isn’t it? In biblical times, everyone knew a shepherd. It would have been a very familiar and helpful metaphor. But is that still the case? And yet, somehow, this image continues to speak to us as people of faith. [Psalm 23](#) is still one of our most beloved psalms and passages in scripture. Jesus as the Good Shepherd is still one of the most familiar ways of thinking of him, and of picturing him.

And as I thought about why this is still the case, in this very modern, post-agricultural world of ours, it struck me that the answer is actually quite simple: We all long for a shepherd. We all know that we need someone to lead us, and to protect us, and to guide us. We are a lot like sheep. And sheep need shepherds. The world, then and now, looks for someone to lead, because we need someone to lead us.

I suspect that is why superhero movies are still popular, and probably always will be. Because our world needs heroes. Our world needs leaders. Our world needs good and faithful shepherds, to take care of us, and to lead us.

Our world certainly needs a good shepherd right now. We need someone that we trust to lead us, as a nation and all around the world. We are in uncharted territory. What will the world look like after this pandemic runs its course? What will our community look like when we get back to a “new normal”?

Like so many other congregations and businesses, this pandemic has affected our life together, profoundly and perhaps permanently. We all long for getting back to the way things were, but will that ever happen again? We don’t really know what the world will look like when all of this is over. And there is no road map through all of this. There is no handbook to turn to.

Note in our text: That the good shepherd is different from a hired worker because he is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. A person who is hired to watch the sheep is not invested in them like the shepherd, and will likely desert them when danger approaches. Jesus suggests that as the good shepherd, He will not desert the flock and will be willing to lay down his life.

Jesus also alludes to the universal reality of his eventual sacrifice. In v16, Jesus acknowledges that there are more sheep that are not inside the sheep pen. These sheep also need him as shepherd and will be brought in to join the rest of the flock, and all will have the same shepherd.

Finally, Jesus alludes to his own choice in laying down his life. Not only is it his choice to lay down his life, but his choice to take it up again. Through a post resurrection Christian lens, we can clearly see this allusion to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus could have chosen to forego his death, but chose instead to face death and return from the dead.

I have to admit, there is something a little disheartening about being described as a sheep. It is difficult to admit our likeness to animals that so depend on a shepherd for survival. We are much more accustomed to being shepherds in control than sheep so in need of leadership. Yet, when it comes to our relationship with God, Jesus understands our human tendencies better perhaps than we understand ourselves.

When it comes to our faith, we are very much like sheep in need of a shepherd.

- Like sheep, we have the tendency to follow.
- Like sheep, we often confuse true leadership with the kind offered by hired hands (shepherds who are in it for the wrong reason).
- Like sheep, we are endangered by those who prey on our vulnerability, the spiritual wolves.
- Like sheep, we are perhaps most vulnerable to ourselves and our tendency to wander away from the care of the shepherd and the safety of the flock.

We certainly need a good shepherd, like Jesus, who is willing to care and sacrifice for us. Accepting that we are indeed like sheep is the hardest part for many people. It is our human nature to want to be in control of our lives. Yet, to be a follower of Christ, we must accept our spiritual likeness to sheep and our need for a good shepherd.

So, this morning, I am going to explore three ways that it still is helpful to think of us as sheep, and what that can teach us about our life of faith, in this moment when we are so in need of our shepherd.

An article from: Livestock Trail, by UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS EXTENSION

- Contrary to what you may have heard or even expressed yourself, sheep are not stupid. They rank just below the pig and on par with cattle in intelligence among farm animals. Sheep react to the situations they are placed in according to instincts that have been developed over centuries.
- In the overall scheme of things sheep are grazers, which means that they obtained their entire feed supply by grazing grass and shrubs. At that time their only means of survival was to run from danger, and to band together in large numbers for protection.

1. Flock Animals:

First of all, sheep are what is known as “flock animals.” They like to be together. They don’t do so well on their own. There is safety in numbers, and sheep seem to know this. So, they tend to spend a lot of time together, and they find a lot of benefit from being together.

And we as humans are “flock animals” too, are we not? We like to be together. We like to gather in groups. There is this innate drive to surround ourselves with like-minded people, in sports and politics, at work and at school. We tend to flock together. “Birds of a feather flock together”, as the old saying goes. Congregations, of course, are sometimes called flocks.

We are a community that recognizes that there are important reasons to be together. And the pandemic hasn’t changed this. It has been a challenge, of course, in these days of social distancing. but no less important to find ways to be together. But what is unique about congregations is that we are not necessarily birds of a feather. I mean, most of us all live in this community, but beyond that we have a number of differences. We are different ages, we grew up in different parts of the country, we have different tastes in music, we support different sports teams, we have widely-varying political views, and on and on. We are not exactly birds of a feather, except that we are all followers of Jesus. And so, we are here, flocking together, as best we can.

When you spend any time studying Scripture, it becomes very obvious that God's plan is for us to be together, in a community of faith like this one. You might remember that the first thing Jesus does when he begins his ministry, is to call a group of disciples together. And the early church – after Jesus is crucified and raised – spent a lot of time together. In the Book of Acts, we learn what life was like for those early Christians. In Acts 2:46-47, we find this description:

“They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved”. – (The Message)

Christians are supposed to spend much time together. We are not intended to be on our own. That's why Jesus created the church. That is one of its primary purposes: So that we sheep can come together and be kept safe. And so that we can join together in seeking guidance from our shepherd. Especially in uncertain times like this one. Which brings us to the second way that we are like sheep.

2. Good Hearing

It turns out that sheep have very good hearing, and especially at hearing the voice of their shepherd. A practice typical in Jesus' time was for shepherds to get together with other shepherds and their sheep during the day. A bunch of shepherds, all together with lots and lots of sheep, usually at some kind of watering hole. It was noisy and chaotic, to say the least. But at the end of the day, the shepherds would call for their sheep. And the sheep would follow their own shepherds to a safe place to sleep.

In the midst of all that chaos, and all those competing voices, the sheep would hear their shepherd's voice and follow their shepherd. And that is, of course, what we are supposed to do, too: Listen to our shepherd, our Good Shepherd, and follow him.

There are plenty of competing voices these days, all clamouring for our attention. Voices from our TVs, and our computers, and our Phones and Tablets, and on and on. But there is only one voice that truly matters to our soul. And that is the voice of the shepherd, the voice of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Sheep are good at listening to the voice of their shepherd, and we need to be, too. Now, more than ever!

3. Natural Followers

The third characteristic of sheep that I want to remind us of today is that sheep are natural followers. They don't like to be pushed; they prefer to be led. And it is their shepherd who leads them.

Cattle are herded from the rear by cowboys. They yell and prod the cows to get them going in the right direction. But when you stand behind sheep and make noises, they just try to get behind you again. So, some cattlemen assumed that they were stupid animals. When, in fact, sheep simply prefer to be led.

Cows can be pushed. Sheep must be led. And, when you think about it, that's really not that stupid. Sheep trust their shepherd, and go where the shepherd goes. And they let the shepherd go first, to make sure the way is safe, and then to invite them to follow him.

In our Australian context the Border Collie is such a valuable worker. Sheep see the dog as a predator, or danger, so they band together for protection and move away from the danger. By controlling the dog, a shepherd actually controls the flock.

And isn't that what Jesus is asking of us? To be his followers? He's not going to push us. He's not going to force us. Instead, Jesus just keeps calling us, in many and various ways, and inviting us over and over to follow him. He promises to lead us, to protect us, and even to lay down his life for us. And he invites us to trust him. Trust him and follow him.

Conclusion

Jesus is our shepherd, the Good Shepherd. The leader that our world needs right now. And we are his sheep. Flocking together, listening for his voice, and following him. Perhaps this image of being sheep, and Jesus as our Good Shepherd, is not so out of date as I might have thought. Or perhaps, we need an out-of-date image, to remind us that what we need right now is not going to be found in technology, or progress, or any of the things that we are tempted to believe in and follow.

Our world has not out-grown its need for a shepherd. It is now, just as it has always been, a world in need of a good and faithful shepherd. This passage reminds us that we are blessed to have a shepherd, who is good and loving and faithful; who promises to lead us all the days of our life, through the trials and tribulations and whatever this world throws at us.

Brothers and sisters as we gather together in 2022 let us be faithfully listening for His voice, and by following Him. We are all called by God to service. In following Jesus' example, we invest our lives in others to the point where we realize it is not about me, it's what is best for others, for the family. Whether we are doers, encouragers, cheer leaders, mentors, or prayers, may we continue to ponder the great news of the resurrection, and love one another so much that like those early believers, "People in general will liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved". Acts 2:47. Amen.