

Sermon for 4-22-18; Good Shepherd Sunday
John 10:11-18 & Psalm 23
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Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." This is how he describes himself in today's Gospel reading from the 10th chapter of John. This is an identity Jesus claims as his own -- not a label placed on him by others -- the Good Shepherd. Such a powerful image; Jesus the Good Shepherd has been portrayed in paintings and statues, frescoes and stained glass, from the third century through today. A kind and gentle-looking Jesus, surrounded by sheep, holding a lamb on his shoulders or in his arms.

An image like this lasts, it persists for so long because we need it, because it speaks to our hearts and our imaginations in a deep and meaningful way. We need that Good Shepherd to guide us through life's trials, to tend and comfort us, to reassure us in times of fear and pain.

Now of course, when Jesus spoke these words two thousand years ago, his listeners knew what he was talking about. Turn-of-the-Millennium Palestine was a thoroughly agrarian society, where families relied on their crops and their livestock. These people knew all about sheep and shepherds, so they understood the metaphor. But unfortunately, I don't! My sheep experience is very limited, and I cannot say that I've ever met a real-life shepherd.

In my effort to grasp the subtleties of the Good Shepherd image, I got a bit carried away with my sheep research early this week. For example, I learned quite a bit about sheep vision: did you know that sheep have rectangular pupils, and because their eyes are on the sides of their heads rather than up front (like ours), they can see everything around and behind themselves, but not what's right in front of their noses?

That sounds like me, I thought... focusing on what's behind me, things I wish I could undo or words I'd like to take back, and ignoring the possibilities right in front of my face.

I also learned that sheep are very sensitive to movement, and that they startle easily. That also sounds like me... I can be overly sensitive at times, and changes in my plan or routine unsettle me, and lead to anxiety. I, too, startle easily.

And my favorite sheep fact I learned this week? Back in Bible times, and even in the Middle East today, shepherds don't worry about keeping 'their sheep' apart from others. When it's time to rest for the night, multiple shepherds will combine their herds into one large flock and stand guard over all the different sheep together. When morning comes, and it's time for the herds to go their separate ways, each shepherd calls to his (or her) particular sheep and they come... because the sheep recognize their shepherd's voice. The sheep know who their shepherd is.

Jesus's followers, and the crowds who came to listen to his teachings, understood all these facts about sheep (and many more facts, that I don't know). They also knew the significance of the shepherd as a religious symbol in the Jewish tradition. Think about it... who were the shepherds in the Old Testament? The great patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, the prophet Amos, King David, and of course Moses, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets and leaders. All shepherds! All shepherds who, according to the Scriptures, were chosen by God to lead God's people through times of trial and tribulation.

So these folks, the ones listening to Jesus describe himself as the Good Shepherd, got it. They understood shepherding, they understood how much sheep need a shepherd, and they understood how God had raised up shepherds time and time again to guide and serve and protect God's people. But we, here in the city of Springfield in the year 2018, we don't 'get it' quite as easily. We're disconnected from historic small-scale animal agriculture, and we're disconnected from the long and vibrant and spirit-filled Jewish roots of our religious tradition. We can't grasp the full significance of Christ's words here, "I am the Good Shepherd," we don't hear those words with the same level of emotional and cultural impact.

But the more that we learn, and the more that we live, the more we begin to understand. The more we hurt, the more we fail, the more we cry, the more we realize just how much we need a Good Shepherd in our lives. A Good Shepherd who will tend to us, stay with us, claim us and love us through good times and bad.

Some of us are really quite skilled at building up and relying on what Jesus calls hired hands.... things that we look to for our worth, things that we hope will protect us from harm and comfort us in sorrow, things that we think will give our lives some kind of meaning or purpose. These hired hands can be people -- politicians, religious leaders, talking heads -- or groups of people -- social clubs, political organizations. These hired hands can also be tangible things, or goals or ideals -- money, power, popularity, status, strength, achievement, control... these are just some of the things we follow, we strive towards, because on some level we believe they can keep us safe and insulate us from suffering. But as Jesus points out, we cannot depend on them: "[In times of trouble] The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep" (verse 13).

I wonder who, or what, your hired hand(s) might be? I'm pretty sure I know mine. My hired hands, at least in this season of my life, are accomplishment and control. It's very easy for me to fall into a pattern where I believe I can control everything if I am careful enough, attentive enough, if I work hard enough. It's easy for me to define my sense of well-being by the number of items I've crossed off my to-do list. But accomplishment and control are nothing more than hired hands. They are sorry substitutes for the ever-present, all-encompassing love of a Good Shepherd. A Good Shepherd who tends to us, who knows us inside and out, who surrounds us with love and light during times of pain and loss.

We had pain and loss in my household this week. On Tuesday our sweet, cuddly, silly guinea pig died. His name was Chubbs, and although some folks might find it hard to understand, he was an important part of our family. My husband, who is mildly allergic to guinea pigs, tolerated Chubbs and cared for him when I wasn't around, but my son and I really loved him. When Chubbs died this week, Jesse lost his 'pig-brother' and I lost my spiritual director.

If you've ever loved an animal, maybe you can relate... holding that soft, warm body to my chest at the end of a long day, petting him and listening to his quiet little squeaks and purrs, looking into his pure, dark, innocent eyes gave me a precious feeling of gentleness and peace, an "It is Well With My Soul" kind of moment that made me feel grounded in createdness, in life.

I know I'm not the only one who finds holiness in the connection between humans and animals. Episcopal priest and theologian Carter Heyward famously wrote about the sacred dimensions of horseback-riding: "If God is the creative wellspring of all that lives and breathes and loves, and if God meets us through those who offer us occasions to drink from this healing spring, then surely it is this same holy spirit that a horse offers to the child or adult who comes, seeking strength."ⁱ

I get it. Although I'm not a 'horse person' I can understand how someone might experience holiness through a connection with any of God's creatures, or any part of God's good and beautiful Creation. Mountains and valleys, oceans and streams, rocks and horses and guinea pigs -- all reflect to us something pure and essential about the One who created them.

Losing Chubbs this week was painful for my family, both emotionally and spiritually. I know we will welcome other animals into our lives and love them dearly; indeed, Jesse was promised a dog as part of our upcoming move to Springfield, and he is counting the days. But this past week, as we have grieved the loss of our little furry Creature of God, we have needed our Good Shepherd. We have needed comfort, and reassurance, and tenderness, and peace.

And guess what? The hired hands just don't cut it. Distracting myself with technology doesn't fix anything; checking items off my to-do list doesn't heal me, and busy-ness doesn't insulate me from the challenges of life and love. It's a lesson we learn over and over again -- our substitute gods, the money and power and success, can do nothing real for us. We are fooling ourselves when we rely on those hired hands. Only the Good Shepherd, who knows us and loves us and calls us his own, will tend and soothe us and wrap us in his arms when we need it most.

Jesus tells us that he is our Good Shepherd in today's Gospel reading. He is the one who knows us and loves us and lays down his life for us. And the familiar words of King David in the 23rd Psalm could be our words, because they describe what it is to be a sheep in relationship with the divine Shepherd: "The Lord is my shepherd..."

I remembered, this week, what I have forgotten and remembered, forgotten and remembered over and over again -- that the Lord is **my** shepherd, too; mine and yours.

The Lord is my shepherd.
He blesses me with an open heart.
He is present in my sorrow, and he dries my tears.
He forgives my mistakes, even when I cannot forgive myself.
When I stray too far, he gently calls me to return to him.
He takes upon his shoulders those burdens I cannot bear.
He knows my weakness, and he loves me anyway.
He comforts me, and holds in his arms those I have loved and lost.
He invites me to sit beside him, and be still, and know peace.
The Lord is my shepherd.
The Lord is your shepherd.
The Lord is our shepherd. Amen.

ⁱ from "The Horse is the Priest" (<http://www.openhorizons.org/the-horse-is-the-priest.html>)