

“It’s Not About the Sheep; It’s All About the Shepherd”

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Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

May 11, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

Over the years as if by some unseen magnetism we hear these texts about the Good Shepherd and fix our eyes on the sheep of the story. I keep a picture from Mary’s grandmother, Helen Petersen, of the Good Shepherd holding a lamb, in my office as a reminder of her love and care (she always made me Cream of Wheat – I normally hate Cream of Wheat but hers was really quite good!). I keep it also because I find great comfort at the thought of Jesus carrying me (though I’m no little lamb at 60) when I’m feeling lost or afraid. But focusing on the lambs and sheep gives short shrift to the One who is actually the heart and core of these verses: “It’s Not About The Sheep; It’s All About The Shepherd.”

What’s the difference? Well, the closest I’ve been to a flock and shepherd was talking to Jehovah’s own shepherd, Ed Schuster, and his shepherdess wife, Clarice. Ed told me about storms and lambing time (you need to keep a ewe calm when she’s about to deliver) and how working with sheep gives you soft hands from the lanolin. What I so loved in Clarice was her ability to shepherd any child that came within her care – all the ones they had, neighbor children – she claimed them as her own if they weren’t getting the care they needed and did child care in her home and here at Jehovah.

I mention her because often the mothers who raise children are not biological – they are godmothers, family friends, older siblings and like the Hebrew pattern the mother is the teacher of faith lived out day-to-day. They are the ones who read the Bible stories, teach the prayers before meals and bedtime and connect the events of everyday life, needs expressed in prayer, met by God through many means and thanksgiving offered to God who provides and gives us life abundantly that sets the pattern for a life lived by faith.

In truth shepherds can be male or female – and their task is not easy. Sheep are not dumb as some would have you believe but they don’t have very good eyesight. For example, they will wander themselves into danger, nibbling their way through the grass and never seeing the edge of a cliff. For that same reason, they have to be watched carefully so they don’t eat noxious weeds and get themselves sick. They are high maintenance; they will actually drown in running water so they need to be led to “still waters” a bit of wisdom King David passed on long ago in his best known psalm. In their defense, however, I would like to point out that if you or I were as heavily dressed in wool as they are before a shearing, we’d probably drown, too.

I have heard that sheep can actually hear quite well, which makes a lot of sense, since according to the Gospel, sheep hear and recognize their shepherd’s voice, making them incredibly loyal. They aren’t driven from behind, like cattle; they are led by the shepherd out in front who is confident that they will follow on the strength of nothing but that beloved voice.

Oh, one last little nugget before I violate the opening of this sermon and spend too much time on sheep. Sheep are ungulates; they have multiple stomachs so they can digest a lot of the fiber they eat. And, well, this might be uncomfortably familiar, but we all know what happens when you overdo it on the fiber. The thing is, if you're a sheep, those gasses will build up in your abdomen to the extent that if you lie down, you may not be able to get up. Shepherds call that being "cast down," or lying on their backs, feet up in the air, vulnerable to every predator and yes, looking pretty silly too, until the shepherd finds them and sets them upright and nature takes its course and all is well again.

But enough about sheep because "It's Not About The Sheep; It's All About The Shepherd." Ok, so what's up with the Shepherd? Well, He enters the right way—not like a thief or a bandit or a false shepherd. He knows where the door is and He uses it. And that might seem terribly obvious to all of you, but you have to understand that way back in the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah and Ezekiel, God laments all of the "false shepherds" who have misled His people and He promises to come and shepherd them Himself. The fact that He chose the door of the Incarnation, being born of Mary, as a human, makes that promise even better because, just as Jesus hung around with the "wrong kind of people," so God in Jesus was not ashamed to befriend sinners. Ironically, again in the Old Testament, at times shepherds were actually honored, "The Lord is my Shepherd,"— King David elevated their station in life. By the time of Jesus, shepherds were just about at the bottom of the social totem pole, right down there with tax collectors and prostitutes; unwelcome in the Temple, unfit for proper society, and fully expected to be damned once the Shepherd Israel expected finally arrived in all His glory.

Well, the gate by which our Shepherd entered this world was by no means glorious: born in poverty, a scandalous birth by an unwed mother, the supposed son of a simple tradesman; the hero one day, and a humiliated, failed messiah the next, hung out on a cross for all the world to see. He is the One who calls His sheep and the sheep who know Him follow. Follow where? Well, Jesus said if we want to follow Him, we must attend to His Word and practice it, and pick up our cross and follow Him. Jesus the Shepherd calls His sheep to come and die with Him even though, skipping ahead a few verses, it doesn't end there with death; He came so that we might have life abundantly.

Now that's quite a shepherd and looking at Him, listening to Him, following Him, doesn't leave us sheep much time to pick at one another. I don't know if real sheep get into fights; they probably bump into each other because of their poor vision, but I do know that people get into fights; people bump into each other, people wander away from those green pastures of faith and well, people get bloated, "puffed up" as St. Paul would say, with their own self-importance, when they come to believe that "It's Not about the Shepherd; It's All About The Sheep," and they start to live their lives backward: mixing up their priorities, putting last things first and first things last, making poor and harmful and sinful choices, until they no longer hear their shepherd's voice; they no longer hang out with the flock and, well, if they are fortunate, they find themselves "cast down"; laid low by their faithless lifestyles.

Fortunate? Is that what I just said? Yes, fortunate, though I would not recommend trying it. What's so fortunate about being "cast down"? Well, when you are "cast down" you need only look up because there, though your eyes of faith may barely see Him; there stands the Shepherd

who's come to pick you up and bring you back to the fold – back to the fellowship of the other sheep, all of whom are fed & nourished by the Good Shepherd the Promised One of God who is the Gate – the Faithful Shepherd who lays across the opening to protect the sheep from anyone, anything that might come to harm them and who will lead them out of the sheepfold into abundant life, good pasture. Today, rejoice in all who have shepherded you in faith – mothered you by nurturing you in God's Word and come with you as mentor and guide to feed on God's Word and at His Table. Today rejoice that God Who brought you up out of the waters where you died to sin has taken you and me, cast down sinners, and set us on our feet to follow to live abundantly as He leads us into all the blessings and life eternal that He has give us, pours out on us in abundant grace. Amen.

Now may God our shepherd, who knows us by name, guide us by His gentle voice that we make walk in confidence until we reach our Father's Fold.