

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017

The Lord is My Shepherd

The sheep follow him because they know his voice.

Our gospel this morning is all about sheep. You know, those cuddly, white, soft, fleecy, fluffy little animals that are so endearing in our imaginations. Seriously, is that not the first thing you think of when you hear someone referring to sheep—a little stuffed lamb sitting in the corner of a baby crib, waiting for the arrival of a newborn? My first child had one that had a wind-up music box inside of it, and I couldn't swear to it, but I think it played "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Or maybe that nursery rhyme itself pops into your head, because it was the first tune you learned to play with one finger on a piano before your feet could even reach the pedals. What is it about sheep, anyway? Why is it I ask is there nothing cuter than a lamb—itsself a term of endearment for humans?

The country neighborhood where Mark and I lived in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia offered a route for me to take to and from work that was a bit of a back way past a sheep farm. Most often, the sheep were in a distant pasture and were just part of the scenery, but in lambing season the ewes would be in a barnyard close to the road and looked about as uncomfortable carrying a term twin pregnancy as human moms. They looked tired and

cranky, shuffling around in their scruffy dirt-stained wooly bathrobes, waiting for their imminent offspring to make their way into the world. Then it always seemed like within just a day or two, the yard was filled with new lambs, snowy white and jet black, startled and jumpy, bleating and eating, and all over the place. Within a week, they were running and playing with each other, leaping and jumping—just as noisy but twice as cute, and I tried not to think about the timing of their births to coincide with Passover and Orthodox Easter that would be celebrated in the next month or two, when they would all be appreciated in a quite different stage of their life cycle. I never had time before my morning commute, but sometimes in the evening I would pull off the road just to watch them just being God’s creatures in all their beauty and innocence and joyful play.

Then, during the walking vacation Mark and I took across the Lake District of Northern England two summers ago, I got to know lots of sheep more up-close and way more personal. Sheep vastly outnumbered the humans we were hiking with, as we made our way along the footpaths through their pastures and along the thousands of miles of stone walls that kept them organized and safe. I learned that a sheep is not a sheep, but that there are different kinds of sheep bred for different kinds of wool with different purposes. I saw sheep whose job it was to keep the grass trimmed

around the gravestones in a churchyard, and sheep who were pretty free to roam from field to field and into the front yards of houses—occasionally requiring a constable to sort things out. I saw sheep that were spray painted with splotches of certain colors in certain spots—a system of local branding that told each farmer which ones in a larger herd belonged to which humans. I learned that there is one particular breed of Herdwick sheep dating from the 12th Century that is so connected to its territory, that when there is a land sale, the law says the sheep must go *with* the land, because if you move them even many miles away to new pasture, they will wander back again and again until they find their way home. And I learned that each ewe and lamb (mother and child) had a distinct call and response language to each other—often heard across a field or a stone wall. Even while playing in a group of lambs of similar age and disposition, or munching on plenty of green grass on a beautiful sunny day, lambs would call out to their mothers that they couldn't see or find, anticipating replies that reassured love and protection and sustenance were near. It was almost heartbreaking to listen to this call and response, and it instantly reminded me of a time when I was five and got separated from my mother at a supermarket, calling and listening frantically for her voice.

So it is easy to love sheep, and to love the idea of a shepherd taking care of his sheep. It is easy to love the image Jesus has offered of himself as a good shepherd, who places the care of his sheep over his own well-being. And if Jesus sees *us* as the lovable sheep, then he can't help but to love us, even to the point of bearing us upon his shoulders to bring us back into the fold when we get lost, right?

It wasn't until I got home from England and did a little research that I found that from the point of view of a sheep farmer, sheep are not such romantic creatures as I had believed. Sheep are pretty filthy animals—their wool is sometimes so caked with even their own waste that they need to be cleaned with *Woolite* before they are sheared. They are frustrating to care for, and basically not smart, with one Texas shepherd quoted as saying, “Sheep are just born looking for a way to die.” Sheep will follow other sheep even when it is not in their best interest, and are not known for turning around in self-preservation if their leader is on a path of sheep self-destruction. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd, but sometimes will ignore it; and they *will* sometimes follow a stranger, if they do not know their shepherd well. In the words of one Australian shepherd, “Sheep work is dirty, unromantic, and requires a certain hardness of heart.” So much for those snow-white lambs, I guess.

So, if sheep are so much trouble, and so difficult to manage, why are we blessed with the image of Jesus as our Good Shepherd, leading us to green pastures and beside still waters? What was Jesus doing with this story about the sheep gate in this conversation?

First, Jesus is continuing a conversation with the Pharisees just after he has healed the man born blind from birth. The resistance of the Jewish leaders in believing that the power of Jesus to heal was from God led Jesus to call them blind, and they had not taken that well. And then knowing that a Torah scholar would have understood a scriptural precedent for a Shepherd King going back to the time of King David, Jesus confounded them by offering them an image of a different kind of Shepherd King—one who calls his sheep by name and leads them into the sheepfold—an enclosure which keeps the sheep safe from night predators. This kind of shepherd would then lie down across the opening of the enclosure, becoming the gate, risking his life to guard the sheep. A wolf would have to go through the shepherd to get to the sheep. Then in the morning, the shepherd would lead them back out into the pasture, so they could be nourished by the abundant grasses. This kind of shepherd would give his life for the sheep—sweet, noisy, troublesome, endearing, dirty, smelly not so smart sheep.

What comes after this passage of John, is one where Jesus says explicitly that *he* is the Good Shepherd, the Shepherd King who came into the world not to kill and destroy, but to give life, abundantly. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep—no one takes it away from him but he lays it down of his own accord. Jesus also says that some of his sheep did not yet belong in his fold, but that he would bring them into it, making one flock, one shepherd.

I don't know about you, but in spite of what I have learned about sheep that helps me see them a bit more realistically and a bit less romantically, I don't mind being likened by Jesus to a sheep. I know that our Father in heaven has always known and loved that precious soft downy joyful bleating vulnerable lamb inside of each of us. God made us for his own, and loves our deep created goodness—fiercely and tenderly. Perhaps there are days that God pauses from time to time just to watch us run and leap in the fresh Spring sunshine, on those days when we can't help but appreciate our abundant life. At least I hope God does that, because I know that most days—being the self-centered sheep that I am—the only thing that has my attention is the sweet grass that is right in front of my face, and maybe the distant call of my children who just might still need something. Most days I am sure I am suggestible enough to lead or to follow my fellow

sheep into short-sighted trouble, by listening to the stranger and ignoring my shepherd's voice, as if I was born just looking for a way to die.

It is a wonder and a blessing that our Shepherd King keeps calling us—with a voice we can hear above our own bleating—but he does. He calls us not just into the sheepfold for our own protection but out of our self-focus, our self-interest, and our self-destruction into the one flock of abundant life. He calls us into lives of meaning and purpose, where we can't help but to love and care for one another. He calls us into witness—where without shame we can stand before the skeptical Pharisees of our lives and tell them about Jesus and what it means to listen to his voice. And he calls us into his heart, like Herdwick sheep being so deeply connected to their own ancestral land that straying is not an option. *The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.* Thanks be to God. AMEN