

Easter 4 April 26, 2015

John 10:11-18

### **The good shepherd: a declaration of solidarity**

In the good shepherd imagery, we catch a glimpse of who we are in God's life. Today's Scripture readings are pastoral, peaceful poetry, often used at burial services to evoke the protective, comforting image of the good shepherd as we rest in his loving arms.

Heard in context of the Gospel of John, Jesus' portrayal of the good shepherd is fierce and aggressive. Heard in the context of Jesus' words, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm demands something of us. The Holy Spirit calls us to community, to solidarity, and to action.

Jesus read and taught in the synagogue, he quoted from Hebrew Scripture. Jesus undoubtedly prayed the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm to God his Father. Surely, when Jesus described himself as the good shepherd, this psalm was in his heart.

To be the good shepherd of Hebrew scripture evokes the memory of the many Israelites who were shepherds *before* they became great leaders: Abraham, Moses, Isaac, Jacob, David. When Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd,' he claims a place in this Jewish tradition of leadership.

'I am the good shepherd' is one of seven 'I am' sayings in John's Gospel, these are familiar to us all. 'I am the true vine,' 'I am the gate for the sheep' – each *I am* reminds us of the Hebrew name for God – *Yahweh*, or *I am* – and points to Jesus' identity as God's Son, his relationship to us, and ultimately, his divine nature. When Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd,' he places *himself* as Lord in the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm.

The setting in the Gospel of John passage is not the rolling countryside of the hills around Jerusalem, nor is it the pastoral scene of the psalm. Jesus had been tried *in absentia* by the Pharisees who were eager to determine who, and by what authority, restored sight to the blind man by putting mud on his eyes. Because blindness was thought to be caused by sin, the Pharisees decided to throw the formerly blind man out of the city. When Jesus heard about that, Jesus found the man and invited him to greater belief, that Jesus is the Son of Man. Jesus said, "*I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.*" John 9:39-40. The Pharisees overheard this vindication, and challenged Jesus. Are you calling *us* blind? John 9:40.

Jesus engages the Pharisees directly, speaking of bandits and thieves, strangers, wolves – implying present danger and violence. Jesus' confrontational words frighten some, and, (John writes), many of the Jews were saying, "he has a demon and is out of his mind." John 10: 20-21.

*I am the good shepherd.* In first century Judea, the shepherd was an outsider – smelly, unkempt, uneducated, lower class – often not permitted to enter the villages and towns. *I am the good*

*shepherd* is a claim with an edge to it, it's an affront to the religious elite. Jesus says *I am* those people whom you, Pharisees, cannot even see, who to you are invisible, unworthy of notice. You are blind to people like me.

Perhaps an equivalent today would be, *I am the good migrant worker*.

Jesus lectures the Pharisees about authentic shepherding, God the shepherd of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Jesus the good shepherd will not back down when challenged, or in the face of danger.

The shepherd's role is risky. The good shepherd is self-giving, he goes ahead to the pasture, to the river, to be sure it is safe for the sheep; he finds and guards the shelter. The good shepherd is not a hired hand. The hired hand is not personally invested in the sheep; he will not lay down his life for the sheep, will not put their well-being ahead of his. The hired hand is an "I" driven person, who abandons the flock at the hint of trouble.

Is Jesus comparing the Pharisees, the religious authorities, to the wolves, or to the hired hands? Either way, what Jesus says is not flattering. It is, in modern parlance, 'in your face'. *I am the good shepherd* is not a gentle metaphor – it is Jesus' claim to superior moral leadership and authority.

And also a veiled threat. The sheep know and follow the shepherd's voice. The sheep and the good shepherd share mutual trust and relationship. This is solidarity: the sheep, together, will follow the good shepherd – by implication, not the hired hand. Do you hear that undercurrent – the people are *my* sheep, they will follow *me*.

Through the incarnation, Jesus knows what it is like to be one of the sheep – a poor carpenter's son, an itinerant healer from outlying Galilee, now in conflict with the powers of empire. Jesus' future will be to lay down his life for his sheep.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is written from the perspective of the sheep. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. I shall not want* is more than an expectation of God-given abundance. It is a commitment of obedience to the shepherd. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays '*Father if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. But not what I want but what you want.*' Matt. 26:39.

We sheep of the good shepherd need not worry about food and water, clothing or shelter. We are freed by the shepherd's watchful presence to go about life, lightened and enlightened by trust and abundance. Yes, there are wolves, but the shepherd will protect us with rod and staff. The shepherd will lead us to where we *should* be, not one will be lost. No matter how many sheep there are, the shepherd knows *each sheep*, and each knows his voice. By those words, *I shall not want*, we commit to be content where the shepherd places us: *I shall not want* to be something, someone, or somewhere else. I shall not covet what my neighbor has.

“*I fear no evil for you are with me.*” When we pray this psalm together, we sheep of this fold here at Christ Church, the ‘you’ we address is not only God. You are with me, I with you. We sheep are drawn together; we are *with* one another. We are in solidarity – together we embody God’s self-giving love. We sheep belong to each other! *With* one another in the flock, we share in God’s abundant life.

The psalmist envisions a table, a banquet for fellowship. Around the table, God happens – we know that, as family, as church community, as Christians coming to the table to share the Eucharistic feast.

Jesus makes another edgy claim to the Pharisees, one we prefer to ignore more often than not. *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also...so there will be one flock, one shepherd.* These words are inclusive, and in the Gospel context, a threat to the authorities. Jesus the revolutionary: *There are more who follow me* is a declaration of the scope and the power of his leadership.

That there will be one flock reminds us that we are part of one great family of God. Each one of us is of immeasurable worth in the life of God. Who is part of the one great flock, is the business of the shepherd, not the sheep. We must welcome and make room for all God’s sheep. The resurrected Jesus asks Peter to ‘feed my sheep’ – all of God’s sheep.

I share a personal story here. Dale and I have six adult children, twelve grandchildren. Most often, when the grandchildren were small, only two or three were invited to stay overnight at one time. So, when they visited, each regarded as their very own, the beds they slept in, the toys they played with, the sippy cups. Each claimed a favorite toy or book, that he or she would seek out when first arriving, and often carry around for the whole visit. A match box airplane, a snoopy dog, a lego construction. The cousins visited in each other’s homes, but here, in Anacortes, the space, the toys – and granny – belonged to them, individually.

A few years ago, we invited all to come one weekend. They had to decide who got the two beds, while the rest found places in sleeping bags on the floor. The toys were shared, but since each had a different favorite toy, there really wasn’t a problem. Each one’s needs were met, and more, because the something special that each treasured individually was in hand. I overheard a conversation between some of the little ones – ‘that’s my granny,’ ‘no, she’s my granny.’ An older one intervened, ‘that’s everyone’s granny’ – confirming the relationship between them, as well as to me.

Late in the day, I watched the twelve headed down the narrow path to the lake, single file, led by one of the older boys, who carried a broom held high as a standard to follow through the tall grasses. Reflecting on that scene today, I see the sheep from many folds, gathered into one flock. “*I have other sheep*” pushes us to consider and welcome those who are ‘other’. Hospitality tests us, requires us to overcome our fears of ‘other.’ We are all *other*, until we sit at table together.

Today, there are waves of people fleeing from the political and religious violence in North Africa and Syria, pouring into Italy, Greece, Turkey, Spain. An estimated 4 million people have left Syria alone. This is a migration of people, not ‘an immigration problem.’ Although there are many migration routes into Europe, we hear most often about crossing the Mediterranean. More than 10,000 refugees have been rescued from the waters so far this year. Many more lost their lives in part because the merchant vessels diverted to help them are neither trained nor equipped for marine rescue. Imagine a merchant ship crew of only 8 to 10, pulling hundreds out of the water, feeding and clothing them until they get to land.

The sheer numbers involved encourage a lucrative industry of human trafficking. What is happening in the refugee centers that are growing exponentially? How does a country like Greece, already on the brink of economic extinction, absorb the impact? A plea for help appeared in a recent headline from an Italian paper, ‘EU cannot leave it to Italy to stop migrant slavery.’ An article demanded that the European Union develop a long range comprehensive plan; another opined that the UN should stop the flood of migration by putting refugee camps in Niger and Sudan.

What would the good migrant worker do? How can we offer our hearts and hands to help? Refugee camps are not a long term solution, but only temporary measures creating a platform for disease in crowded living conditions, and, if not resolved quickly, the end of hope for tens of thousands. Surely there is room in the United States, in Canada, in Europe, for some of these people. Yet, xenophobia – fear of the stranger, the other– paralyzes Europe and North America in this crisis.

What are we afraid of? We talk about global economy – let’s talk now about globalization of population. *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold, I must bring them also.* One great flock.

In Christian Century magazine, a Mennonite pastor writes,

*God makes room for eternal life to grow, for divine love to multiply even in the worst of conditions, even in the valley of the shadow of death. The hope of Easter is that not even crucifixion can put an end to God’s work of making space for life in the world.* April 15, 2015, p. 19.

We are called to live in a Christ-like way, making space for life here – in this country, in this Skagit Valley. Christian hospitality pushes us to overcome our fears, and trust God’s abundance.

*I fear no evil for you are with me.* We are one people.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote, “*if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.*”

**Amen**

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