



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 4 (B)

To Be a Sheep

RCL: Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Every year, regardless of the lectionary cycle, we are invited to live in a rich, metaphorical world. A world where there are a whole slew of sheep and one, good, sacrificial Shepherd. It can be a funny world to live in, since not many of us have first-hand experience living off the land, tending to a flock, or roaming about foraging for food. And it may seem silly, even a bit embarrassing and put-on to do so. But scripture is beckoning us to try on its world. The Lord is inviting us to live among the grassy slopes and rocky hillsides. While we often ask the words and stories of scripture to enter our worlds, this morning, scripture is patiently and imaginatively asking us to enter its world.

There are many ways to live in this metaphorical world. One could do heaps of research on the ins and outs of Old Testament shepherding or the varieties of first century shepherding. One could think intently about the landscape sheep inhabit – pastures and scary valleys – as the Psalmist so vividly preaches. One could even dig into the not-so-subtle sacrificial overtones of today’s readings, plumbing the rich depths of Passover imagery and the cleansing quality of blood.

But, instead, we shall inhabit our metaphor in a simpler manner. We shall imagine where we might find ourselves in this world. And since there are not too many animate options and it seems rather obvious who we’d be, let us imagine ourselves taking on the furry wool of a sheep, nuzzling our noses into the supple earth, and meandering around with our sheep buddies, listening for that one voice who calls us by name.

What does this mean, then, to be a sheep?

To be a sheep is, at its most basic, to be a creature. Sheep probably do not contemplate whether or not they are God. They likely do not spend their days thinking about ambition and success and storing up wealth for themselves. They have much more pressing tasks to tend to. For instance, they must eat. And eat. And eat. And when they are done eating, they must take a little rest. Perhaps, they will find that they need some time to roughhouse and playfully pick on one another. Then they find that they need to rest some more, cuddling up in a heap, snoozing a bit in the sun or the shade of a tree, depending on their desired temperature. They do not spend their days thinking that they are the Source of all that is, the center of the universe, nor the creature at the heart of creation. Sheep, it seems, are just so happy to be sheep:

eating and walking and playing and sleeping and bleating their way through life. A sheep is a creature, created and loved by their Creator.

Being a sheep also means being a part of a community, a herd. They are safest and happiest as part of a big community of sheep. When one does wander off, it knows it is alone, scared, and in a precarious position. It knows that – out here on this hillside all by itself – it will be an easy and quick dinner for that wolf or other roaming predator. Sometimes, a sheep gets lost, it's true. But most sheep know to stick together, that their body depends on other bodies forming into one large protective pile. Sheep do not think they should live all alone, independent, and never – ever – reliant upon any other sheep. A life alone would be a sad and crazy life for a sheep. Sheep know that they need other sheep, desperately – because their very lives depend on it.

And while we could say lots of other things about sheep – like how they are fairly intelligent and how their wool is used to warm lots of other creatures around the world – let's conclude with one last thing about being a sheep:

Sheep are followers. Now, this is where it may get a bit trickier for us to really imagine ourselves being sheep. But go with me on this, even if you think you're a naturally skilled, born-to-be-leader. Sheep are followers because they have no idea where they are going. They do not have an internal GPS system that has highlighted all of the best pastures around. They would stay in their same pasture, eating stubby little grass. Or they would wander into a den of wolves. They need someone to call out their names (yes, sheep respond to their names). And they need someone to yell out, "Hey, over here, there's some really thick and luscious grass for you to eat." Sheep need a guide – someone who knows their needs and can tend to them; someone to ward off scary wolves and defend them in the face of danger; someone who will memorize their markings, knowing their distinctive identities; someone who will help bring new lambs into the world; someone who will bury those who have died from illness and age; someone who is trustworthy and someone who knows the lay of the land, the places of danger and the places of respite.

We are sheep, in this metaphorical world, because we can't be anything but sheep. We are not the ruler of our lives, our herds, nor the masters of our destiny. To be a sheep – and at this point it is glaringly obvious – is remarkably similar to being a human. Creatures who need community and who can't help but follow – since we often have no idea where we are going in the first place.

We are sheep because we are in desperate need of a Shepherd.

And this shepherd is a particularly *good* shepherd. One who will lay his life down for you. For me? A mere sheep? Yes, for you. This good shepherd will take you on a long and winding journey. And as you follow this shepherd, there may be days where you wonder to yourself: does this shepherd know what she is doing? She seems to be taking us to a far and strange land. Those pastures back there seemed good enough for us – why, oh why, are we traveling again? It is scary out here.

But then you will arrive. And there will be such glorious sustenance, unexpected gifts of joy, and immense confirmation: this is a *good* Shepherd, and he knows what he is doing. Your dry mouth will be replenished, and your hungry belly will be filled. You will know the solace of being known and the grace of not having to have it all figured out by yourself.

The Good Shepherd is beckoning you – can you hear him? He is singing out your name, he is inviting you to get close, to join the herd for the journey, to rejoice in your created goodness, and to follow him wherever he leads, even through those valleys of death.

Will you follow? Will you go where he calls? Will you let him love you? Will you let him carry you when you're wounded and heal your loneliness? Will you trust him, the Good Shepherd, with your very life?

Surely, surely, his goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

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