

Rounding Up the Flock

John 10:1-18



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Every time we come to a Scripture passage about sheep and I start preparing for a message for Sunday, I find myself wading through a lot of ministers and theologians writing in a very uninformed way about what sheep are like: smelly, stupid, helpless, bucolically lazy. Speaking as someone who is very fond of several sheep, they are admittedly not the barnyard geniuses that pigs are meant to be; Winston Churchill famously once said that, “Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Give me a pig! He looks you in the eye and treats you as an equal.”

But neither are sheep especially lazy or stupid. It would be easier to look after them if they were! The picture on screen is of some of our own woolly menaces...but don't let the napping and their fuzzy little faces fool you. What cleverness and energy a sheep possesses is frequently used to get themselves into trouble. In my parent's flock, there is one old sheep who has perfected the ability to unlatch one of the gates, by doing a sort of double-bounce on just the right spot, to bounce the catch open. And then we caught her teaching her little girl lamb how to do the same trick. This particular gate, of course, locks them out of part of the barn where they could get into trouble. So now there's two of them that can unlatch and open gates, and a sheep always likes to take her friends with her when she goes somewhere she shouldn't be.

Sheep are also very capable of recognizing faces and voices, and keeping their distance from strangers; my cousin's little boy came for a visit a couple of summers ago wearing a minion's t-shirt - a weird yellow cartoon creature with one giant eye right in the middle - the sheep kept staring at his shirt and backing up. But even after months away, when I go home to visit, they always know exactly who I am. And when there are new additions to the flock, the trust that the other sheep have in me teaches them to trust me, too. The discernment skill works among sheep, as well: a television programme called *The Secret Life of Farm Animals* did an experiment to see if sheep from large flocks could recognize one another, using life-size cardboard photographs... and they could, avoiding unfamiliar sheep from other flocks and grazing next to familiar faces.

That kind of mutual knowing among sheep and shepherd is central to how Jesus unpacks this image of himself as the Good Shepherd, and God's people as the sheep. I spoke last Sunday about how the Gospel of John seeks to show us that Jesus blurs the line between things of heaven and things of earth, that Jesus himself is, somehow, heaven and earth, divine and human, made one. The line-blurring here is immediately obvious. Jesus proclaims himself to be the gate through which we are gathered in, held safe in the sheep-fold, and turned loose onto good pasture. Jesus is also the shepherd who knows, and calls, and tends to us, rounding us up into his flock.

There are some powerful feelings, some deep responses, that are evoked in us by this image. Being known by name and voice, being yearned for by Jesus, our shepherd; being sought out and gathered into safety. The Good Shepherd comes out into our pastures where we are, and calls us out of whatever trouble our own clever foolishness has landed us in, to go with him. When we're all rounded up, our shepherd heads out and we follow him happily, through the gate, from rich pasture to rich pasture, full of trust and confidence.

The flock is described a little, too. The sheep are able to discern their shepherd's voice from that of any other. They know the shepherd. And they are part of a big flock. Other sheep, of every possible sort, from distant, different sheep pens, are meant to be part of the Good Shepherd's fold.

When we read this image of the Good Shepherd from John 10, other shepherd images from Scripture fill out and deepen our response to it. Perhaps we remember the teaching story Jesus told about the shepherd who had 99 sheep safe in his fold and yet went out seeking the last, lost, lonely one. Almost certainly we remember the 23rd psalm, which we sung together this morning. People who haven't darkened the door of a church in decades know that psalm. It speaks to humanity's deepest longings for abundance and comfort and safety, in every circumstance of life that we may journey through, and beyond into what comes after. The Good Shepherd is an image full of comfort, making us feel safe, and cared for, and watched over with love.

In the end, the Good Shepherd - Jesus - will lay down his life on the Cross to see that the work of gathering and tending his flock is done. I am the gate, Jesus said, the means by which we become God's and enter into renewed abundant life. Jesus also said, I am the good shepherd, rounding us all up and leading us through the gate, and onward from there, until the whole flock is safely enfolded and home.

Last Sunday, I borrowed a description of John's gospel that invited us to understand it as like a magic pool, deep enough for an elephant to swim in, and yet safe and shallow enough that an infant may paddle. I have given you the paddle-pool version of John 10: completely true, deeply comforting and encouraging and uplifting, and sometimes, very much needed. It's perfectly fine to stay where our feet can touch bottom when we need to. But there are some challenging depths for us here, if we are willing to wade out a little further.

Like the letters of the New Testament and the historical events of the Old, even the Gospels have a unique context in which they were written, a particular way of looking at Jesus' life and ministry, re-telling it first for a specific community of Christians in the past, and then for all Christian communities ever since. That's why we have four gospels; not to test accuracy, but to help us gaze on the same person and the same events from different perspectives, giving us more pieces of the puzzle, multiple insights into the same mysteries.

Although it describes events during Jesus' ministry, the gospel of John was written many years afterwards, perhaps nearly sixty years later. In the moment, Jesus is speaking to a group of Pharisees, highly skeptical and very influential religious leaders. So when Jesus says "you," it is you, plural: you Pharisees. The conversation is not a friendly one, either; Jesus is certainly not trying to comfort them. They have, in fact, been subjecting Jesus to an investigative process, having it out with him over healing a man born blind on the Sabbath, and whether Jesus was legally allowed to do so. Jesus has just finished telling the Pharisees that they are spiritually blind, and they are not taking that well at all. And that's when Jesus starts talking about being the gate and the good shepherd for the flock, the people of God.

Sixty years down the road, and John is writing his gospel for communities of Christians in the post-resurrection era with specific needs and the challenges of their own time to contend with. Among those challenges is harassment from the Pharisees, presumably for being a mixed flock of Christ-followers instead of a Jewish flock who worshiped in the old ways and follow Moses' law and the Pharisees' leadership. But there is a little more to it than that.

During the spring and summer of the year 70AD, the city of Jerusalem was besieged by the Romans for about five months, part of the first Jewish-Roman war. The conflict itself went on for about three years, but Jerusalem fell early on. The fall of the city and the destruction of the temple drove many Jews away from their religion and toward the new Christian faith.

This was helped along, I imagine, by the Pharisees - the religious leaders - abandoning the city and their flock of faithful Jews during the siege and reestablishing themselves in another city.

This is the setting in which John the gospel writer redelivered Jesus' words about good shepherds who know and want their people, and gates that lead to safety and plenty. In Jerusalem, during their war, there was a breaking of trust between those who were meant to lead, and those who followed them. Remember that, for God's Jewish people, there had never been a distinction between secular and religious life. There weren't two sets of laws, one for governing temple and worship things and the other for civic, out there in the world things. They wouldn't have even understood the distinction we make so easily today. Invasions and captivities, events like the Roman occupation, introduced that separation between laws for everyone and laws for religious people, but the Pharisees played a far broader leadership role in Jewish religious and civic life than a minister or pastor does today. So for them to abandon the Temple, the city and the people...it was a very selfish betrayal of trust.

Can you imagine how devastating it would be to have your leaders abandon you in a time of fear and desperation? When compassionate, strong, present leadership was very much needed? And yet, crises of trust in leadership, of public establishments, of organizations, in the institution of the Church...these are not unfamiliar to us. I am certain we can all think of times when has our own trust been misplaced, personally and as a community. Politicians on Caribbean holidays in the middle of the pandemic; news reporting that has often seemed more about generating ad revenue through clicks and comments online than conveying a fact; old scandals and abuses emerging from the buried histories of religious institutions.

Like the Christian communities for whom John was writing his gospel, we have had our trust in those who promised to lead us eroded, over the years. How do we know which leader or institution acts for the right reasons? How can we recognize a voice we can trust?

In his conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus draws a comparison between two kinds of leadership in a world made dangerous by bandits, wolves and thieves. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He is present and protective, decisive and inclusive, welcoming in sheep from flocks far and wide. The Good Shepherd cares, deeply, for this ever-growing flock; he leads from the front, showing the way, making that way a safe path to abundant life. He is willing to give of himself to serve their well-being. They are his: they belong to

He is willing to give of himself to serve their well-being. They are his; they belong to him and there is a mutual knowing between them: I know my own and my own know me, Jesus says, just as he and God the Father know one another.

The hired hand leads very differently. He doesn't care about the sheep. The hired hand takes no ownership over them, for their well-being, their care, their flourishing. The hired hand, says Jesus, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. It's a leadership that takes without giving much in return, that makes use of the sheep rather than protecting them, gathering them together and leading them to safe, abundant pastures. In the giving of his life, Jesus does something that no one else had ever done. All past leaders avoided suffering on behalf of the flock. They came the wrong way, not through the gate, which Jesus identifies himself as, and they came to take advantage of the people. Instead of nurturing their well-being, instead of giving them abundant life, the hired hands took it away from them. But Jesus came to give them life through the giving of his own. Not as a victim or an unwilling trade, but as a gift, freely and knowingly given: no one takes it from me, Jesus said, I lay it down of my own accord.

John, in writing down his gospel, noted that the meaning of Jesus' figures of speech was not immediately obvious to the Pharisees. They should've been able to understand, though; perhaps this is yet another example of their willful blindness. The Old Testament contains similar language of shepherd and sheep, and the consequences of shepherds that are bad, that exploit instead of care for those God has entrusted to them.

Jesus goes a little further by expressing the mutual knowing of shepherd and sheep, and the deep sense of belonging to one another. God's people, imagined as sheep, are fully capable of recognizing poor leadership, of spotting a stranger trying to lead them astray. And yet, the more subtle wrongness of the hired hand can still hurt them deeply.

Jesus' drawing out of two very different kinds of leadership can help us to live in our own world, fraught as it is with near daily accounts of faithless shepherds of the political, religious and celebrity type. The Good Shepherd has blurred yet another line between heaven and earth by inserting his heaven-shaped leadership into an earthly situation, and letting us see what good leadership should aspire to be like.

There are two ways we can use what we've learned from wading deeper into the familiar mysteries of these verses from the gospel of John. The first is that, while we must of course also keep our hearts attuned to Jesus' voice as our Good Shepherd and our Gate, we can also turn our discerning ear to leaders in the world around us. We can bring the content of our Christian faith into every part of our life. We can listen for leaders that speak and act in ways that echo the good leadership Jesus described, even if they don't know that's who they're emulating. Leaders who do not act like hired hands, who do not exploit and abuse, and do not run at the first sign of a wolf in the pasture. And we can support them, affirming whichever aspects of their leadership are Christ-like - in government, in business, in the church, in organizations of all sectors and sizes - by our own words and actions and prayers.

We may not hear Jesus' name, but we can learn to recognize his influence, however small, in the hearts and actions of those who set themselves before us as leaders in our world.

The second way is to be good shepherds ourselves. We may not all be leaders in the conventional sense of the word; but we can all lead. Later on in John's gospel, after his resurrection and before he ascends to heaven, Jesus tells his disciple Peter to feed his sheep. There are no limits on the size of flock that Jesus commends to the care of his followers. So the real question is, are we hired hands, or are we good shepherds? Do we nurture and tend to the sheep who have not yet found their way through the gate? Teach them to trust and know Jesus, by how we treat them, in imitation of him? All of us have the capacity to act and speak in ways that reveal Jesus' own love and care, something that everyone deserves, regardless of whether or not they will ever join the flock themselves. Being watched over with love, feelings of belonging and safety, the dignity and respect of mutual knowing that we so love when we read about how Jesus is our Good Shepherd, we can echo that same care in our own corner of the pasture. We can be good shepherds for our Good Shepherd, leading others by following him. Thanks be to God. Amen.