

A Homily by
The Rev'd Jo Popham

“Redefining the shepherd–sheep relationship”
4th Sunday of Easter
April 21, 2024

This is Good Shepherd Sunday. All three years on this the 4th Sunday of Easter our lectionary readings are about Jesus the Good Shepherd.¹ I want us to set aside much of what we have been taught about shepherds and sheep in Sunday School and Bible Study class and from the pulpit. Shepherds often are painted as outcasts, as some of the lowest in 1st century society. And I have often represented sheep as easily influenced not so bright creatures of God. There are really very few references to real sheep in the Bible, but then, of course, using the oft quoted metaphor, we are the sheep. And being represented as smelly unruly dumb creatures is not so flattering. But our Lord so often turned the understanding of worldly things upside down. So let's take a fresh look at the Shepherd–sheep relationship.

One shepherd-sheep picture I carry in my mind is from a Christmas pageant years ago when the smallest sheep in the Christmas pageant – a four year old lamb – missed his cue when the shepherds with their sheep came in haste to see the baby Jesus, and he scampered on all fours all by himself down the center aisle towards the baby Jesus and threw himself on the floor, face down, at the feet of Mary. That little lamb was seeking the shepherd. We often think of Jesus seeking after the one lost sheep, but we too must seek our Lord. And that Christmas, that lamb ran down the aisle seeking the Good Shepherd, though still a baby in the manger.

The pastoral image of sheep running in beautiful green fields in temperate climates is a lovely image, but that is in sharp contrast to the harshness of the Judean hills. The ground was rough and stony. The countryside lent itself more to a pastoral lifestyle than an agricultural one, but shepherds familiar to the Judean uplands knew life was difficult at best. With little grass, grazing was constantly a moving venture. There were no protecting walls, no fences, and sheep would wander off. So shepherds had to be ever-vigilant. Shepherds were with their flocks 24/7. There were no days off. Sheep might

stray into dangerous terrain. The shepherd had to protect the sheep from wolves and other wild animals and thieves. Constancy, patience, courage, and love for the sheep were required. The good shepherd of the 23rd Psalm comes to mind, doesn't it? King David is credited with having written many of the Psalms, so our image we have of a shepherd comes initially from 1000 years before Christ.

In 1st century Palestine, shepherding was very different from the way it is done in our time. The tools for shepherding were few. In a simple bag made of animal skin called a scrip the shepherd carried his food: some bread, dried fruit, olives, and cheese. Like David, shepherds had a sling. In the Book of Judges it is said that the men of Palestine “could sling a stone at a hair, and not miss.”² The sling was a weapon, yes, but the shepherd would land a stone just in front of a straying sheep to warn it to turn back. Then there was the staff which was a club of sorts with a wooden knob on the end with nails in it to defend himself and the sheep. It hung from the shepherd's belt. He also had a rod which is what we would call a shepherd's crook – or crozier in the case of our Bishop. With a rod, the shepherd could catch and pull a sheep to safety. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”³ At the end of the day, the shepherd would put his rod across the entrance of the fold so that the sheep had to pass under it as he inspected each one to see if it were injured in any way.

In Palestine, sheep were kept for their wool, rather than to be killed for food. The lifespan of a healthy sheep was 10-12 years, so the shepherd had a relationship with his sheep sometimes for years and had names for them. It was not as though sheep were pets who would be called by endearing names. Usually the names were descriptive like “Brown-leg” or “Black-ear” or “Velvet” or “Winter” or “Sock-foot.” Shepherds led from in front of the sheep to ensure that the path was safe, and the sheep followed. Sometimes sheep had to be encouraged, but most often the shepherd called the sheep using an odd sheep language of sorts. They knew his voice and would not respond to a stranger. From time to time the shepherd would call sharply to remind the sheep of his presence.⁴ And

when two or more flocks are sheltered together at night they could be sorted out by their shepherd's call to them.⁵

On a train trip across Scotland, I saw no shepherds, but I did see many sheep. They roamed freely. On their fleece coats were markings of some sort in garish florescent green and orange and pink. I watched for miles and miles trying to see if they were their names or what. When I got close enough, I saw it was phone numbers painted on their coats. I came to understand that modern day shepherds did not call the sheep by their names if they got lost or to sort them out. No, someone would make a phone call to their owners who would come and collect their lost sheep.

It took a shepherd messiah to restore the lost sheep of Israel. God sent a shepherd to reveal the reign of God with all the political, social, and personal dimensions that that entailed. Often we lose our way on our journeys, but the right path is still there. And we need Jesus, the good shepherd, to help us find our way.

The closest of Jesus's disciples were fishermen, so the sheep-shepherd metaphor likely was lost to them, and our Lord had to explain what he meant to his own. He applied it to himself. He spoke of two kinds of sheepfolds. There were communal sheepfolds where all the sheep in a village were sheltered at the end of the day when they returned home. The sheep were protected by a strong door and a guardian who held the only key. They would be sorted out in the morning by their shepherd's voice, not by the color of the paint on their fleece. But when it was warm, the sheep did not go home to the village at night, but rather they stayed in sheepfolds in the hillside. These were nothing more than open spaces enclosed by a wall with no door, just an opening to come in and go out. The shepherd would lie down across the opening himself. No sheep could come in or out except by going over his body. The shepherd was the door. Jesus said: "I am the gate."⁶ Through him we have access to God. We know God through the Lord, Jesus Christ. Jesus came to show the people of his time – and all people since – even the people of our time – what God is like. To many, God is a stranger whose voice is not known. But

Jesus can open the way to God for all – Jesus can be the entrance into the Kingdom of God. To “come in and go out” was a well-known Hebrew phrase.⁷ To the Jewish people, to be able to come and go safely – without being molested – meant that life was absolutely secure and safe. It meant that their country was at peace, that they had law and order, that they enjoyed perfect security. Jesus told them – and he is telling us – that if we know God through him all worries and fears will disappear.

There had been a long parade of supposed prophets and heroes who told of the coming of God’s anointed, and then there were others who promised that if people would follow them then they would be saved, but only through war. To get to “the golden age” they would have to wade through blood. The great 1st century historian Josephus wrote of 10,000 tumults in Judaea caused by men of war. But their way of fighting for peace never led to a closer life with God. But Jesus taught that the way to God is a way of abundant love. Jesus came so that we – and all people – might “have life, and have it abundantly.”⁸

My friends, the Good Shepherd may have to use his rod, his crozier, to move us along on our journeys. And Jesus may have to shepherd us –lead us – to places of good food and water, but his greatest strength was and still is his voice. He calls us by name. And we are invited to follow. We are invited to live with Christ – to live a life worth living. We are being led along a path that leads to a life of abundant love. Now surely there is no rush, but one day, we will experience what is to be found at the end of our journey – an eternal life of abundant love.

Do we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd? Do we understand where he is leading us? What if we encounter wolves – false teachers – along the way? Do we accept that the Good Shepherd laid down his life to protect his flock? We have been sought out by the Good Shepherd, and if we seek the Good Shepherd (like the young lamb in the Christmas pageant) then we cannot be snatched away – not ever – not in this time or in the time of eternal life.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ I believe that it is no accident that the Good Shepherd readings fall at this time of the year. It is lambing season. The average gestation period for sheep is around five months. So since the beginning of this church year in Advent it would have been the shepherd's duty to ensure that the sheep are cared for, that their nutritional needs are met, and that they come to a safe place for lambing. The ewes must be well fed to produce a good healthy lamb. They must have enough body fat in reserve to produce milk and be fit to raise their lambs. Lambs must get enough milk, and this begins right at birth. To survive they must be fed at once. An intriguing part of lambing comes into play when a mother sheep dies or when a ewe does not have enough milk to cope with two lambs. Sadly there is often a ewe who has lost her lamb and one who is desperate for another, but she will not allow another lamb near her. A good shepherd will skin the dead lamb and place it – like a coat – on the hungry lamb. Recognizing the scent of her own baby, the mother will take the lamb and feed it. The adopted lamb will wear the coat for a few days until the mother takes to it as if it were her own

² See Judges 2:16.

³ See Psalm 23:4.

⁴ H. V. Morton, *In the Steps of the Master* and W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*. Both say that it is exactly as the Gospel according to John describes it. If a stranger called to the sheep, they lift their heads in alarm, then turn and flee if the stranger continues to call, because they do not know the stranger's voice.

⁵ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of John*, Vol. 2, pp 61-70. I have relied on his commentary throughout.

⁶ See John 10:9.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See John 10:10.