

“Our Shepherd”

Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18

Pastor Liz Miller

April 25, 2021

This Sunday is a little known special day in the Christian church known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The only thing we have to do to honor the day is read the gospel passage that talks about God as the good shepherd. Check - we've officially celebrated Good Shepherd Sunday this year! Perhaps because of this day, there was a video floating around Facebook this week - a patient young man pulled a sheep out of a narrow irrigation ditch. As soon as the sheep is free it runs away and immediately gets stuck in the ditch again.

It makes me laugh because if we're going to use the metaphor of God as a good shepherd and all of us as the hapless sheep that make up the flock, it's an appropriate video. I often say that we find God in the places where there is healing after someone has been wounded. Perhaps I should start saying that we find God in the ditch, pulling us out to safety, no matter how many times we find ourselves in the exact same ditch.

The image of God as a shepherd is one of the most pervasive metaphors for God in all of scripture. Psalm 23 begin, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The prophets Ezekiel and Micah and Hosea all speak of God shepherding their people. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke both tell us of the parable of the shepherd who loses one sheep and leaves the other ninety-nine to find it. Even Peter's epistle instructions the church to “tend the flock of God that is in your charge.”

I love this image of God because shepherds are one of the most humble of vocations - they are often considered the lowest of the lowest class. Across the world they were often a transient or immigrant, migratory workforce. It is one of the earliest professions but it is not respected work - a shepherd must have a real call and commitment not to be swayed away from their flock for something more lucrative or desirable. So often we use high and mighty descriptors of God like Lord and King, but scripture keeps pointing us back to shepherd, God embodying humility and dedication, but as our Creator and embodied in Christ Jesus.

I was reminded of the shepherd's lowly position in cultures all around the globe in an article in Modern Farmer magazine written by Craig Rogers. The article illuminated two other important aspects to shepherding that are important for us to fully capture the intent of God as shepherd:

The first is that shepherds have to both tend to the entire flock and provide for each individual animal. They feed and shelter the whole flock, making sure there is enough for all, but they have to get to know each particular animal - their personality, their individual needs and health, who needs more food or attention. This ability to both look after the whole and treat each sheep as an individual being is key to the health of the overall flock.

When we talk about God as a shepherd, it is a recognition that God is both present caring for all of creation and meeting each one of us where we are at. God is moving us toward love and mercy in ways that are bigger than our imagination, helping all of humanity find it's way to being fed and sheltered and nurtured, but also acutely aware of each individual life, of the hurts we have experienced, of the longings in our hearts, of the particular ways we need to be cared for and loved, of the specific gifts each one of us has within us. God is both/and the whole and the singular, sweeping beyond what we can see and appearing in our lives in unique ways. God is our shepherd, tending to the whole flock and intimately watching after each sheep.

The second thing I learned is that sheep are a lot smarter than those of us with limited shepherding experience assume. Sheep get a baaaaaa-d reputation because they will follow the rest of the flock, sometimes to their own detriment. And if you've been around sheep you know that they are actually quite skittish when separated and hard to reason with. But there is deep intelligence in this inclination toward sticking with the flock. Rogers writes that sheep, "have a community-based survival mechanism because they realize their strength is much greater in numbers and their survival and comfort is enhanced as a group rather than as an individual."

This feels like an important learning for us who make up God's flock but time and again insist on prioritizing individuality over the collective-whole. We struggle to live in community or to expand our ideas of who is included in communal care when it means sacrificing our individual privileges or comfort for the greater good.

If we are sheep, if we make up God's sacred flock, we are called to care for one another, to follow each other into deep community even when it feels difficult, even when we are asked to give up something of ourselves so that others might also be fed and sheltered and cared for.

I watched this dynamic play out this week as we received the guilty verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial for the murder of George Floyd. There was a rush of something that felt like joy or satisfaction that there would be legal accountability for Mr. Floyd's murder. That celebratory mood was particularly lifted up by white communities. But in Black communities, the relief of a guilty verdict was tempered by the fact that the overall safety and well-being of the wider flock was still not secured. What about the Rayshard Brooks, the Daniel Prudes, the Breonna Taylors, the Stephon Clarks, the Philando Castiles, the Alton Sterlings, the Freddie Grays, the Eric Garners, the Daunte Wrights, the Ma'Khia Bryants? When the media frenzy surrounding Mr. Floyd dies off, who will tend to the rest of the flock to make sure that police killings end for good and that there is continued accountability in the legal system or a transformation of the criminal justice system as we know it?

Yes, pay attention to George Floyd. Mourn with his family. Say his name. Seek justice in his name. Take special care of the legacy him as God's child, as a fellow sheep. But continue to tend to the whole flock. Root out evil when it enters our ranks. Be vigilant to work for the safety and well-being of all God's children.

In justice work, whether it is racial justice, or economic justice, or environmental justice movements, it is easiest to gather support around one story. To get people to come together to champion on person, one experience, one moment in time. It is much more difficult to find enough people willing to commit to the longterm, thankless work of changing the systems and oppressive forces that create those individual experiences and moments. That is the work of community that we are called to - to paying attention to the larger forces that impact the whole, that threaten the safety and very lives of some of our beloved flock. To caring for the individual as well as the whole.

I believe that God is our shepherd, already at work in the world wherever there is need of healing and hope. God didn't wait for the jury verdict before tending to George Floyd's daughter and mother in their grief. God won't wait to see if there are charges brought against the officer that murdered Ma'Khia Bryant before tending to her family and all who are impacted by her death. God is moving us to make changes the impact the whole flock, the whole of creation, to be a more just and loving world. God is also showing up in each one of our lives, meeting us in our pain, our fears, our uncertainties, and asking us in turn to show up for one another and the whole flock.

There is another place in the Gospel of John that talks about sheep and shepherds. It comes later in the 21st chapter when Jesus is with the disciples, meeting them in his resurrected state in their grief and confusion and hope. He eats breakfast with the disciples, making sure they are fed, and then he says, "Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me?" Simon Peter says, "Yes, you know I love you." Jesus replies, "Then feed my lambs. Are you sure you love me?" Simon Peter says, "Yes! I already told you! I love you!" Jesus replies, "Then tend to my sheep." He asks him a third time, at which point Simon Peter gets a little hurt and ticked off, saying, "You know everything so you must know I love you!" Jesus said, "Okay then. Feed my sheep."

We are called to be like Jesus, to live out God's mission on this earth, and that is the work of shepherding. We are asked as disciples to tend to God's flock, to consider the health and well-being of the whole community, not just a few, not just ourselves. That is our challenge and our call - to know our neighbors and each other as individuals with different needs and gifts and heartache but to also know what it takes to keep the whole flock together and safe - to work together toward justice, toward love, toward mercy and compassion. It is a humbling call. It is not glamorous. It is as thankless and looked down upon as shepherds from across the ages and around the globe have been looked down upon. But it is the task before us.

May we take up the shepherds crook together. May we find green pastures big enough for everyone to lie down in them. May we lead each other to still waters that are clean and nourishing. May we lead each other down right paths, for Christ's sake. Knowing that together, even when we walk through the darkest valley, we will fear no evil, for God will be with us, God's rod and staff comforting us. May it be so. Amen.