

“Flocked”

Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler

May 7, 2017

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Psalm 23

John 10:1-10

What we can assume about sheep in biblical times is pretty similar to what we would see in sheep in herding societies today. Sheep have many important economic uses: they are a source of meat. But as long as they are kept alive, they have other values: Sheep produce milk, which can be turned to yogurt or cheese. Their wool can be spun into thread or yarn, and then made into clothing, or tent fabric, rugs, or any number of important and useful everyday items. Jane has kindly agreed to make an artful image of wool's use by knitting wool yarn during my sermon today.

Sheep have also played a symbolic purpose in religion. Sheep or lambs would be sacrificed on the altar to honor God or forgive guilt. During the Passover, it was a lamb's blood that Hebrew families splashed onto their doorposts to tell the angel of death to pass over their homes. Later Jesus was spoken of as the embodiment of the Passover lamb. More often than not, I get requests at funerals to read Psalm 23. These are words of ultimate comfort, an assurance that God is a shepherd with a deep and abiding care for God's sheep. At any point of suffering or grief, these are the words in which we want to put our trust. This is the God who will leave the 99 sheep to find the one lost sheep. This is the God who will give just about anything to find you or to find me.

But some do not find the metaphor of shepherd or sheep so appealing. Sheep have a reputation for being stupid. They are assumed to be naive, willing to blindly follow, “like sheep to a slaughterhouse,” as the saying goes. We like our independence, and we like to think of ourselves as not

yielding our intelligence and autonomy to a shepherd or to a flock. However, the program BBC Earth found that sheep are actually not that dumb. They have complex social patterns. They recognize up to 50 distinct faces for up to 2 years. They know and respond to their names. They are fiercely loyal and defend their friends in fights.¹ Despite the fact that they are a peaceful species, they are actually quite intelligent.

Abraham Lincoln once said “The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as its liberator, while the wolf denounces the shepherd for the same act as the destroyer of liberty. Plainly, the sheep and the wolf are not agreed upon a definition of liberty.”² Lincoln gave this parable in a speech in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1964, toward the end of the Civil War. He was speaking in support of a new state constitution that would abolish slavery. In the parable, the sheep’s view of liberty represented those “who would do what they pleased with themselves and with the products of their labor” while the wolf’s sense of liberty represented those who would “do what they pleased with *other* men and the product of of *other* men’s labor”-- in other words, the wolf’s sense of freedom is the freedom to profit off of the enslavement of others. Lincoln makes a claim that one idea of liberty is morally superior, and that is the view of the sheep.

Perhaps some of us see our relationship with God as more like the wolf sees the shepherd. We imagine God as one who gets in the way. We see God as the one who keeps us from doing what we enjoy. We see God as the one who destroys our liberty, by giving us lists of rules and judgments. We see a God who presents a standard to which we will never measure up. Some of us may feel that to honor God, we must deny our true selves. It is hard to feel close to this kind of God, so sometimes we wonder why we even bother.

¹ Harriet Constable, “Sheep Are not Stupid, and They Are not Helpless Either” on *BBC Earth* April 19, 2017

² Niles Anderegg, “The Wolf and the Sheep” on *President Lincoln’s Cottage* website 2/10/2012

However, in John's passage we hear of a shepherd who calls the sheep by name; when the sheep hear his voice, they respond by following. "They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." This passage shows us that God as Shepherd knows our true selves, and calls us by name. Imagine that! Imagine your name being spoken, called, by God! Imagine not only your name, but the real essence of who you are, known by a God who is not a stranger to you.

We do not follow Jesus, or love God, because we fear some kind of hellfire and damnation if we do not. We follow Jesus, we love God, because God has sought us out again and again for relationship, and even came to live among us in human flesh to know us as Jesus did. God was not some wolf in sheep's clothing; God truly became one of us.

Jan Richardson wrote that "The gate of Christ swings toward freedom, not captivity. The shepherd does not assume a role of domination, of power-over that constrains and confines; he is one who pours his power out on our behalf, that we may enter into the places where we can flourish. Or, as Jesus says, that we may have life, and have it abundantly."³

Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century mystic, imagined God saying these words: "I am the breeze that nurtures all things green. I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits. I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life."⁴ Part of what makes Psalm 23 so powerful is that it moves the listener from those experiences of fear: the places of my enemies; the valley of the shadow of death, to experiences of joy: you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. There is also a sense of safety and joy in the Shepherd leading you to green pastures and still waters, and of setting a table before you. Walter

³ Jan Richardson, "Easter 4, In Which We Do Some Sheep Wrestling" in *The Painted Prayer Book* blog, April 11, 2008

⁴ Hildegard of Bingen quoted by Matthew Fox in *The Feminine Mystic*

Brueggemann said the image of table stands for "all the good tables at which you have ever sat and the experiences of joy that happened there and the subsequent vibrations you have from them."⁵

The image of table leads us to hunger for the communion table Jesus sets before us, and it calls us to invite others to come and eat and share in the abundance too. I think that is why it is so powerful that the Sunday School children are working to increase food collections for the Center for Food Action this month of May, and a little later on you will hear from one of our youth, Leo Shim, and his Sunday School teacher Jonathan as they connect action against hunger to our Christian faith.

This afternoon we will celebrate in a Service of Installation our future in ministry together, as you and I are flocked to one another. You may remember it was exactly one year and 6 days ago that I first preached to you in this sanctuary. I believe my first words were "Are you as nervous about this as I am?" We began as strangers to one another, and although I'm sure you still find aspects of who I am strange, you have chosen to trust me as one of your flock. As we go on adventures of faith together, we will find some of those moments that are most laden with fear, but also some of those moments most touched with blessing. Like Psalm 23 says, we may find ourselves in the presence of our enemies when, lo and behold, we discover God has set a table before us and as we come to receive God's hospitality we suddenly find our cup overflowing. God's cup is generous, and I look forward to drinking from it with you. May it be so! Amen.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*