

“Enfolded”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
April 30, 2023

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10

Today is known in lectionary talk as Shepherding Sunday. Psalm 23 shows up 6 times in our 3-year lectionary cycle. This Sunday in the lectionary folds Psalm 23 with Jesus’ talk of being the Good Shepherd. What does this motif say about Jesus, about us, and about our relationship with the divine?

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.

I was reminded of how important sheep are when Eulalia and I took the Afghan couple our church has been helping to resettle in Teaneck to a dinner for Iftar a couple of weeks ago. We went to a Turkish restaurant; I had hoped that the bread, the salads, the mezes— or small appetizers— would be similar enough to Afghan food. They had been fasting all day for Ramadan; what would their stomachs be yearning for?

“All I want to eat is sheep,” Aziz said with enthusiasm. He bypassed the hummus, the salad, he only nibbled on the bread. It was the kabobs he reached for, and luckily the restaurant did have lamb— but not mutton, which is the fully grown sheep meat. Normally, for Eid, he told me, each household buys an entire sheep for feasting, if they can afford it. Can you imagine bringing *that* home from the Shop-rite? I was left wondering, if each household has slaughtered a sheep of their own, who do you invite to your party? But I could tell that the sheep represented a sense of abundance that follows the act of sacrificial fasting during Ramadan.

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. In Eastern Turkey, 450 sheep died because one adventurous animal decided to walk along the edge of the cliff, and the herd of 1500 sheep followed that one animal. The shepherds had stepped away to share breakfast, and could only watch helplessly from a distance. As more and more sheep fell, the pile got higher, a big, billowy fluff that cushioned the rest of the 1500 sheep, so while 450 died, the rest survived. So if your parent ever asked you as a child when you were clamoring for something because “*all* my friends are doing it,” “If so-and-so walked off a cliff, would you do so?” it’s because this has actually happened.

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 1864, 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 *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.

Sometimes, as a pastor, people project onto me a holiness that I’m probably not worthy of, and it can even be an obstacle to people getting to know me, because they think they always have to be on their best behavior around me. I’ve done the same thing, too. In high school, I had a youth minister who I really admired. I had really put her on a pedestal and had never imagined

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

myself as good or as faithful as she. But one day, when I was in her office getting a book to help me write a prayer for Youth Sunday, she was talking on the phone to her roommate and dropped a big F-bomb while I was in the room. She apologized to me when she got off the phone and seemed deeply embarrassed that she had cursed in front of a church youth. Looking back, I think that was an important moment in my sense of call, when I thought, “hmm, maybe I could become a pastor, too.”

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

Our scriptures today indeed enfold us into a sense of abundance. That’s the life Jesus invites us to when he is our Shepherd. In the early church, followers had such a sense of abundance that they sold all they had, their possessions and goods, and then gave to each one as any had need. In the wild, if sheep aren’t shepherded to green pastures, the grass around them becomes bare, and instead of caring for one another in the flock, each sheep becomes a competitor with the rest of the flock for scarce resources. The weak ones die, or even get eaten. That’s not how Jesus wants us to live or to treat one another.

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 accompanies the listener in those experiences of fear: the places of my enemies; the valley of the shadow of death. But the Shepherd doesn’t leave them there: she guides them from those places, to experiences of abundance and joy: you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. There is 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 Brueggemann said the

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*

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 gate stands before you. It doesn't determine who is in and who is out. It's simply an invitation. Come, and get folded in.

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