

2021 04 25 – The Good Shepherd

John 10:11-18 & Psalm 23 (The Inclusive Bible)

I grew up on a farm in south central Ontario. It was a general farm with dairy cows, pigs, chickens, a few steers and a herd of sheep. The sheep spent most of the year in a fenced pasture, near our farm buildings. Generally, it was a safe place for them to graze, but every few years a coyote, or wolf or stray dog would arrive in the area and we would lose some of the flock.

My dad kept a .22 rifle in the closet by the back door and the only time it was ever loaded was when the sheep were in danger. I remember one year, dad went out with the rifle and the next day there was a rumour that the neighbour's dog had come home with a bullet in its butt. Shepherds, good shepherds, protect their flock.

Today's gospel reading begins with Jesus saying, "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd would die for the sheep." Of course, we know that Jesus was speaking metaphorically. He was using an image that was very familiar to the people of Galilee and Judea. The image of the shepherd was one that had been used in Hebrew writings for centuries. The Pharisees, the temple authorities, and all the others who were listening to Jesus, would have been familiar with this image and probably would have connected Jesus' words to the ancient prophets or the psalms. It's very possible they started reciting in their heads the words that we just sang: "The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want."

Jesus may have been the son of a carpenter, but even so, he understood the role of a shepherd. He knew that shepherds cared for and protected their sheep. They would lead them to green pastures and refreshing pools of water. They would use their rod to fight off wild beasts and their crooked staff to pull the sheep from crevices where they had fallen in the rock. Shepherds knew each and every sheep and would realize when one was missing. In those days there were no fences so shepherds were with their flock 24/7. Because of that deep connection, the sheep knew their shepherds and trusted them

Jesus not only understood the role of the shepherd, he also knew the difference between the shepherd, or owner of the sheep, and a hired hand. The hired hand would never know the sheep in quite the same way and would never be willing to risk their own life for the lives of their flock. Jesus was using this metaphor to distinguish himself, and his Abba God, his God of Love, from the temple authorities, the Pharisees and their God of laws and regulations. Jesus regularly questioned whether the Jewish leaders really had the best interest of their people at heart. Were the rituals and the rules of the temple and the synagogue really leading them to the promise of new life, to green pastures and still waters?

In the same way we need to ask ourselves if we are being misled by the hired hands of the 21st century. Who are we following that may not have our best interest at heart? Who are we following that may be leading us astray?

Probably the most obvious place to look would be to our political leaders. We could certainly argue that we live in a time when politics has become so divisive

that it has led us to fear and even hate those who look different than us or those who hold different views than we do. This week the world held its breath as we awaited the verdict in the trial of the man who murdered George Floyd. What's amazing to me is that there was a possibility that the jury might have acquitted him; that somehow they might have deemed that police officer's actions as necessary or reasonable. When the rhetoric of our leaders is focussed on what we are against rather than what we are for, then the result will always be unnecessary violence and even war.

We could also argue that the corporations who saturate our world with their marketing messages are also hired hands with no true regard for our well-being. Marketing does have a role to play in a functioning economy but in recent years, it has been less about sharing product information and more about creating a sense of inadequacy that makes us think that we are not enough and that somehow their product will make us better or at least sufficient. Retail therapy has become a reality of our consumption-driven world.

Finally, and maybe even most insidious is the impact of social media on our lives. It has become an essential form of connection in this time of distancing and isolation. But the dominant value in social media corporations is still money and their algorithms have been designed to keep us staring at the screen. The more we watch, the more advertising they sell, the more money they make. What benefit are we really receiving each time we follow them "down that rabbit hole"?

Many of us are also content providers on social media, focussed on how many likes or shares our posts or tweets will obtain. But what is this form of communication doing but making us think that we need affirmation from others and when that doesn't happen, creating feelings of devaluation and insecurity. How much time, how much effort should we really be spending on social media?

These are three examples of individuals and organizations that don't always have our best interest or the best interest of our world at heart. And all three of these "hired hands" have a message that focuses on the self above all others, a message that shares false narratives of scarcity, insecurity and fear. ¹

Jesus, on the other hand, teaches a life of abundance, love and connection. "The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want." His is an Abba God, a parent God, whose love is unconditional and everlasting. He speaks of a God for everyone, a Shepherd who doesn't choose a single fold of sheep, but whose love extends to all people, all creation. "And then there will be one flock, one shepherd."

Jesus is speaking to us. He is calling us to open our eyes to all the "hired hands" who may be drawing us in with alternative truth, false promises, or deceptive algorithms. He is calling us to follow him instead. To listen to his message of God's amazing grace. To realize that we are loved just as we are. That we are enough, that we have what we need, that the Essence of Love is our Shepherd, and that we shall not want.

Jesus is calling us to follow his example of self-giving and to open our hearts to those in need. He knows that God's love and protection is made real in and through each one of us. That we are God's rod and staff in the world. It is up to us to recognize the wolves who are attacking the sheep and to save those who have fallen in the crevices. Jesus is calling us to care for God's people and all the rest of God's creation.

We are able to follow Jesus call, because we know that we are not doing this alone. We know that the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being is with us. We know that the Shepherd of Love will protect and support us too.

Notes:

1. Thanks to David Lose for the three examples of hired hands:

<http://www.davidlose.net/2021/04/easter-4-b-hired-hands/>