

Following Our Leader

John 10:1-16

May 15, 2011

I.

Many years ago I grew up on a farm in Ohio. Susan sometimes says that I never did grow up. I was just raised.

But from before I was in the first grade until I left for college my family raised cattle, sheep, and hogs. And at college I majored in agriculture before I went to law school. I even took a course in sheep production in which we learned more than you ever would want to know about sheep.

And I can tell you, from firsthand experience, sheep were the worst. They were stupid, stubborn, mindless, smelly, dirty, near-sighted, got lost easily, and couldn't even make their own way into the barn.

For example, it was standard practice with sheep to surgically remove the tails of all the lambs before their wool started to grow so they would remain clean and not become a breeding ground for varmints. Sometimes that happened anyway and it was necessary to mix up a concoction of kerosene and pine tar to apply to the affected area with a stiff paint brush.

And if you didn't watch where they grazed and what they ate they easily could become bloated, and sometimes the only treatment was to puncture the side of the sheep with a slender sterile knife to release excess gas that otherwise could collapse the lung and kill the animal.

And I won't even describe having to work with sheep dip, one of my least favorite memories. In short, sheep took the most work, and produced the least profit. And the Bible does not tell us much about any of that.

II.

But today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is known in the church as "Good Shepherd Sunday." The Gospel always describes Jesus' role as the good shepherd, we always read the twenty-third Psalm, and preachers often speculate about comparisons between sheep and people.

To some extent that's because sheep and shepherds were prevalent in first century Jewish Palestine. But there also were a lot of cattle. Jesus was born in a manger used by cattle. And in those days people's wealth frequently was measured by the number of cattle they owned.

But still there are more references to sheep in the Bible than to cattle. Except for the idolatry of the golden calf can you think of important biblical events that somehow involved cattle? And it's easier to imagine Jesus as the good shepherd rather than the good cowboy, isn't it?

So why did sheep end up as one of the symbols for humanity? Does God actually look at us as sheep? Do some of the characteristics of sheep lend themselves to descriptions of Jesus' teachings and our relationship with God? Possibly so. In some ways I believe we can say that metaphors about sheep in the Gospels symbolize some important parts of our faith.

We can be stubborn, and we do get lost from time to time. And we can be wayward and stray. If one or two of us goes in the wrong direction, some of the rest of us might not be far behind. Even though we are individuals, we can have a tendency to follow the crowd as it seeks material and worldly things.

So perhaps we do share some attributes of sheep. We do need someone to look out for us and lead us in the paths of righteousness. We do need someone to help us find greener pastures

we cannot find on our own. And when the wolves come in a symbolic sense we need someone to protect us. That's what a shepherd does for real sheep, and it's what Jesus does for us.

III.

Let's examine how that idea is woven into today's Gospel. Jesus was speaking to some Pharisees and Jews who had not yet become believers. It would have been a tough audience. And they heard a teaching that has four closely related parts I can summarize and then explain a little further.

In the first, Jesus spoke of how the shepherd enters the sheepfold by the gate, and calls his own sheep and leads them out. And he said the sheep follow because they know his voice. The point is that those in Jesus' flock will know him and will follow where he leads.

But apparently the crowd did not get that point. The reading said they did not understand this figure of speech, so Jesus tried again. And here, in this second part, he added a twist and said, "I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved and find pasture." We only can become part of his flock through him.

Then, in the third part, he referred to himself as well as us. He said he came that we may have life, and have it abundantly. And he did not mean that because of him we will have of worldly things, but rather that we will grow in spiritual things. Abundance is quality, not quantity.

In the final part of the reading Jesus said he was the good shepherd. But he was not stating his occupation, at least while he was in the world. The Bible tells us he was a carpenter as a young man. Later he was called "rabbi" and "teacher." And in the largest sense he was the incarnate revelation of God and prophetic revelation of the messiah.

IV.

And each part of today's reading helps to explain some of the enduring questions of our faith. A lot of theology is packed into these verses. So let's look at them.

The first part, where Jesus spoke of entering the sheepfold and calling out his sheep, suggested a large enclosure with many different shepherds and flocks. This type of sheepfold served a larger population of sheep, and had a gatekeeper who admitted shepherds when they appeared. And, as Jesus said, those who enter any other way would be assumed to be thieves or robbers.

These, of course, were figures of speech. Thieves and robbers would be false prophets and ungodly teachers who corrupt God's Word. Other flocks are the collections of worldly things that draw us away from a life in Christ, and strangers could be the secular leaders who foster and support those temptations.

But, as I said earlier, the people did not get the message. As a result, there is a second part of the teaching. Jesus said he was the gate for the sheep, and that anyone who came through him would be saved, and would be able to come and go and find pasture.

Thus, Jesus was making clear that he is the way. He is the only way from mortal life to eternal life; from worldly life to spiritual life. This foreshadowed Jesus' words few chapters later when he said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). We will hear more about this next week.

The third part of the reading is Jesus' proclamation that he came so we might have abundant lives. What did he mean by abundance? Many of you might recall the 1989 hit song by the rock group, Queen, "I want it all, and I want it now."

But the lyrics of that song describe someone seeking material things. And today's Gospel reference to abundance is not helpful in that search.

Abundance does not necessarily mean prosperity, although through God's grace we might prosper. Abundance does not promise health or longevity, although through God's grace we might have both. And abundance is not a story that begins with "once upon a time" and ends with "they lived happily ever after," even though through God's grace we might do exactly that.

Abundance is being content in the knowledge that God will help us through our difficulties, and that he will supply our needs as may be best for us. It is the belief that when we make choices and decisions based on Christ's teachings we will be blessed and know his peace.

So let's again consider those rock lyrics by Queen. I want it all, and I want it now. What if we tweaked them a little, and rather than expressing a desire for acquisition and consumption, they spoke of salvation and sanctification? Then, where do we go if we want it all and we want it now?

Today's Gospel tells us. Jesus is the source of it all, and the source of it now. He gave it all, and we can have it now.

This leads to the concluding part of the reading. Jesus said he is the good shepherd, and would lay down his life for the sheep. We know from Good Friday he did exactly that, and we know from Easter that he was resurrected as our hope of eternal life.

And here I want to emphasize that the resurrection of our Lord and Savior is at the core of our faith. No other religion embraces such an idea. Abraham and Moses died and their work was done. Muhammad and Buddha were mortal. Confucius and Gandhi went to the grave just like other people. Every New Age leader will pass away.

Christ was different. And his resurrection distinguishes Christianity from everything else. It's why we believe there is more to life than what we see around us. When we ask about the meaning of life, we look to the resurrection for the answer.

V.

And so, Jesus is the good shepherd. Can we be good sheep? Do we always hear his voice and follow him? Do we turn away from the thieves and bandits who would lead us astray? We might consider two things.

The first is to listen for our shepherd's voice, which comes to us through the Holy Spirit, and to believe that he died for us in this world so that we could live with him forever in the next world. The second thing is that as his sheep we are called to follow him every day, and to do the good works now that come from a sincere faith in him.

I'm reminded of the TV ad where two consultants presented a plan to the company president to help the company grow, and the president said, "That sounds great, let's do it." Looks of uncertainty come over the consultants' faces, and one of them hesitantly responded, "Oh, we don't actually do anything, we just give advice."

Jesus is more than just a consultant. He does more than just offer advice. As the revelation of God on earth he died to save his sheep, and he rose from the dead to serve his sheep. In the best of times we thank him, and in the worst of times we can call on him. No matter what we do or need he will be there for us. And if we are in his flock we know we never are alone. *Amen.*