

Sermon “I Just Want to be a Sheep”

Kirk of St James

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This week in Grayson’s pre-kindergarten class there was a lot of excitement. They had been incubating eggs and waiting for them to hatch, and on Friday one of the teachers told them they would likely start hatching over the weekend. The daycare was absolutely electric when I stopped in with Grayson on Monday, the first chick was out and three more were on the way. It was incredible how excited everyone was, and parents and siblings were all drug over to the pen to see their new little friends who the children were only too happy to name! The long wait of incubation was over, and new life had arrived and it was fun to watch the process through the eyes of all these little ones and it also made me a little nostalgic.

My sister’s class in school once incubated eggs and one of the new little chicks ended up coming to our home. It was out of season, and we did not have any other chicks at the time so chikabur as she came to be called lived in a little penned area of our house and she became a beloved fixture. She loved to sit on my dad’s shoulder while he talked on the phone, she would follow you around, and sit on your feet if you stopped for any length of time. One day we were heading out to a birthday party, and she had been outside, and we could not find her to put her back in. We knew she would pop up eventually, we just didn’t expect it to be out of the spare tire under Dad’s truck halfway through the party. She became quite the celebrity after that! Living on a farm is never dull.

Ancient farm practices form the basis of our scripture readings for this morning. Today is known as the Good Shepherd Sunday in our church year, you may have noticed the theme in our scripture reading. It always happens on the fourth Sunday after Easter, which affirms that Jesus was resurrected after death and will never let us go through life alone. “Our assurance is based not on what we do or do not do, but on what Jesus does in his role as the good Shepherd.”

For a largely agrarian culture these shepherding examples made sense. In our modern context we may wonder why Jesus chose those particular images, and what their significance is today. Is this a narrative about cute fluffy sheep, or is there something fundamentally more important in this imagery?

To put our reading in John about the good Shepherd into context it is helpful to first read Ezekiel and hear about the things that bad shepherds either do, or neglect to do. In this example shepherds who fall short of their calling do not care about the flock; they care only about themselves. They are willing to use their milk for food, their wool for clothing, and sacrifice their lives for meat, but they do not care for them in return. Instead of helping the weak they abandon them, instead of healing the sick they let them suffer, instead of tending to injuries they ignore the needs of the flock. They allow the sheep to wander away, they do not gather them, look out for them or protect them. Instead, the flock is vulnerable to sickness, death and loss. In many ways it is incomprehensible that the shepherds fail to do any of the things they are tasked with. Instead, they plunder and take and allow their charges to suffer, with no thought for their well being. In Ezekial we see God promise that justice will be done, the shepherds will be judged, and God will do everything they have failed to do, because God does love and care for the flock.

While today the image of God as shepherd is almost romanticized, or at the very least idealized, in the ancient world it would have been an affront. “The life of a shepherd was anything but picturesque. It was dangerous, risky, and menial. Shepherds were rough around the edges, spending time in the fields rather than polite society. For Jesus to say, “I am the good shepherd,” would have been an affront to the religious elite and educated. The claim had an edge to it.” Jesus does not shy away from the implications here. We remember that when Jesus was born, it was the shepherds who were told first. Many of Israel’s greatest leaders were

shepherds of sheep before they became shepherds to people. Moses, David, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all shepherds before they were called by God.

In this passage Jesus also fully claims his identity as the son of God. He identifies as “I am the Good Shepherd” the “I am” echoing the words of God when Moses asked who they were. Echoing these words Jesus affirms he is God’s Son, and prophecy is being fulfilled. Another interesting point with this passage is that the word “good” that is used to describe the shepherd is “*Kalos*” in Greek which has several additional meanings. “It implies that which is ordered, sound, noble, ideal, model, true, competent and praiseworthy.” This shepherd is absolutely everything you would ever want a shepherd to be.

So why sheep? What not camels, goats, donkey’s or some other animal? I believe it is because of the unique relationship between a flock and their shepherd. Barbara Brown Taylor who is one of my preaching idols wrote a sermon called “The Voice of the Shepherd.” In it she writes “In Palestine today, it is still possible to witness a scene that Jesus almost certainly saw two thousand years ago, that of Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures they have grazed during the day. Often those flocks will end up at the same watering hole around dusk, so that they get all mixed up together – eight or nine small flocks turning into a convention of thirsty sheep. Their shepherds do not worry about the mix-up, however. When it is time to go home, each one issues his or her own distinctive call – a special trill or whistle, or a particular tune on a particular reed pipe, and that shepherd’s sheep withdraw from the crowd to follow their shepherd home. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd’s voice, and it is the only one they will follow.” In contrast to give us a different image, cows need to be led from the rear with shouts and prods, cows can be pushed, but sheep must be led. Oddly enough I have witnessed both firsthand. In Ukraine when the shepherd took the cows home for the night they walked along behind, and each cow turned into their gate. It was always

funny to me when someone had to leave a meeting early because a new cow did not know their own gate. Then in Scotland in the evening you would see the shepherds go out and you could watch their sheep follow them home. “Sheep seem to consider their shepherds part of the family, and the relationship that grows up between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to.” As Jesus says, “I know my own and my own know me.”

In thinking about these images of shepherd and sheep what are the implications for us today? It here when the words in Psalm 23 transform from a pretty picture to reality. We follow a God who not only loves us, but also takes care of our deepest needs and vulnerabilities. Who never loses sight of us, who brings us back when we are lost, who binds us our hearts and hurts, and who provides what we need. I know I say this often, and I know the words may sound nice, but we wonder at their depth. Sure God “loves” us but not all of me, not my roughest parts, not my failures. The truth is, you are known and loved to your core, and I also believe that reality is one of the hardest truths to live into in our Christian lives. That sometimes we struggle to see our own worth in the flock, where we think God might be there for others but not for us, where we are afraid to let the truth of God’s love trickle into the most broken parts of our lives. But friends if there is one thing that can change our lives, it is allowing ourselves to believe this in the centre of our being, and let it fill all the places we need it most. God wants a life filled with completeness for you.

I believe the other message in this passage shows us how we in turn can help the good shepherd with their work in the world. That we can help feed, and tend, and bind up, and welcome others into the flock. May the voice of the shepherd speak into your lives in ways that are both loud and quiet, that are lifegiving in the ways you need most, and cut through the lie’s society tells us, so you can feel the truth of the good shepherd in your heart.