

John 10:11-18

Psalms 23

Acts 4:5-12

1 John 3:16-24

SHEPHERDS, SHEEP, AND HIRED HANDS

In the reading just prior, John 10:1-10, We are told that Jesus is the gate for the sheep and he came so that these sheep could have life and have it abundantly. Then in our reading today, Jesus continues that allegory. Jesus is not only the gate, but JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD. The GOOD SHEPHERD lays down his life for the sheep. Not only does the Good Shepherd lay down his life, but he does so willingly and with intention. The GOOD SHEPHERD knows his sheep and the sheep know him. The GOOD SHEPHERD also invites new sheep into the fold.

Jesus responds with the 'shepherd' comparison as the Pharisees were trying to decide whether or not he was a demon for having cured the man blind from birth ... on the Sabbath ... that was trouble.

Jesus is asking ... am I a demon for helping someone? NO, I am a shepherd who gives over his life to help his sheep. Shepherds care for their sheep on the Sabbath. The Shepherd's life is not important ... the welfare of the sheep is all that is important.

Oh, and by the way, King David was a shepherd. Everybody in Jesus' world knew this important connection. As we know, in the first century middle east, everybody would know how valuable sheep were and how much work it took to care for them.

Then, there are the 'hired hands'. They may appear to be looking after the sheep, but they run away at the first sign of danger. They leave the sheep to be 'snatched and scattered' by the wolves, because they don't care about the sheep, really.

This shepherd/sheep/ hired hand allegory is central to our thinking about Jesus, and I don't know anything about sheep, so, a few months ago, when Rev Bob preached about the sheep and the shepherd so wonderfully, citing this book by Phillip Keller *The Shepherd Trilogy*, I went and got that book right away.

I worked hard to understand this relationship of the GOOD SHEPHERD. It's about God through Jesus caring so much more than mere hired hands because the sheep, WE SHEEP, belong to God. God created and therefore owns the sheep. God cares absolutely for the sheep ... WE THE SHEEP... as if God's own existence depends on the well-being of these sheep because, it DOES. God's world depends so much on the way the Sheep exist with God, the righteousness of the sheep, that God sent Jesus to care for the sheep in the name of God.

If you look at this on a smaller scale, like a company, there is an owner (God); there is a manager (Jesus), cut from the same cloth as the owner who knows exactly with the owner wants done and how to do it, AND talks with the owner all the time, has the skills to carry out the owner's dreams in this company; then, there's the workers. That's us ... we are the workers in the company, the sheep who need to be herded.

So, this is where I got concerned for you and I in the allegory. The sheep just keep being sheep and their mere existence as sheep seems to satisfy the comparison. But what if we are the hired hands? MOREMORE

What if we are the worker, the hired hand in the company with a job to do? AND, what if we are just doing it for the money? What if we get overburdened by the work and run away?

Hired hands aren't necessarily bad, they just aren't seeing the OWNERS VISION, they aren't focussed on the beautiful future, they are probably focussed on the scary present with pretty limited skills, to boot. The hired hands might be listening to the rumours of bankruptcy of the company and getting scared, or maybe they heard that gas prices are going up AGAIN and they're worried because they need more money, or maybe they just forgot their lunch and they are worried about being hungry.

Scripture assures us of our job and of our relationship with our GOD. FROM 1JOHN ...

Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything.

If it is our work to carry out God's plan in this world, then, is there ever a time when WE are the hired hands? When we are just going through the motions, waiting for a pay cheque, running at the first sign of trouble? OF COURSE THERE IS THAT TIME.

We need to ask the manager (Jesus) ... the manager knows the truth. OUR manager knows what the Owner (God) wants, and OUR manager knows what it's like to be one of us. Our manager understands us better than any other manager ever. Jesus has been one of us. Christ knows us intimately and is not the least disturbed by our weird, rather selfish ways. Christ is for us, loving us, building bonds of love, knowing us. In Christ, we are safe and assured; we are true to our genuine nature. Not just a hired hand, not just in it for the power or the money, but in it for the continuing of God's creation.

We are asked to help our fellow sheep. We can't be the shepherd, but we can look to the shepherd to help our fellow humans. We can strive to be better than a better hired hand by asking our manager what to do BECAUSE our manager knows the boss really well.

In scripture, imprisoned Peter proclaims "... let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth."

As always, following Christ assures a bright and hopefull tomorrow. So we lift our heads and hearts to follow Christ.

So what can we do to help like the shepherd? How can we be better than a hired hand? The 23rd Psalm tells us how.

1.

He Leadeth me ... In the west our shepherds herd sheep from behind, dogs nipping at their heels. But in the Middle East the shepherds go in front, and the sheep follow.

We can lead the way by setting the example of a caring life.

2.

Makes me to lie down in green pastures ... Did you know that sheep will eat and eat and eat all the grass, including the roots, until there is nothing left but dirt. Then, they will just starve to death. Sheep need to be 'moved' from their voracious eating by the shepherd.

We can help people to stop ‘eating everything in sight’ ... to calm their anger and rage that eats up their peace.

Personally, I hate it when I’m angry at someone and some really good friend says, ‘maybe they’re just having a bad day.’ I really want to hate and hate and rage, but my friend brings me to greener pasture to restore my soul.

Be the peaceful presence that calms the rage.

3.

Bring the rod and staff

A shepherd uses the rod to beat off predators.

Be the rod of ‘presence’ that sits ‘with someone in the dark’, offering your humanity to ‘beat away’ that predator grief and fear.

A shepherd uses his ‘staff’ to bring sheep back from wandering off. Be the staff that pulls someone back from the dark abyss where grief and fear can overwhelm and envelope a loved one.

Be the human presence that can help another feel safe.

4.

Prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies; Before the sheep arrive in the summer pasture, the shepherd has a lot of work to in order to get the land ready for the sheep. For example, there can be vegetation that is poisonous to the sheep that must be painstakingly removed. The shepherd will place a supply of salt and minerals over the range for the benefit of the sheep; the shepherd will decide well ahead of time where the camps will be so that the sheep have the best bed grounds. This is all necessary preparation because without this care, the range is ‘like an enemy’ to the success of the sheep. THIS is necessary because the only thing the shepherd wants is for the sheep to succeed. The shepherd will be filled with joy when the sheep thrive, so,

Be truly happy for people when they succeed.

5.

Anoint my head with oil ... OIL was the remedy at ‘fly time’. Sheep attract these bugs that irritate their nose and eyes, to the point where they might run around banging their heads on things to seek relief from the annoying bugs. Then there’s the ‘scab problem’. Sheep suffer all kinds of small nuisances that can drive them to distraction. The resolutions require that the shepherd is present and tends to, does not ignore what may appear to be little irritations.

Be present, be stay with people, don’t assume they can manage the ‘little annoyances’ on their own, show up, help people to avoid being overly isolated.

MORE OIL

And then there’s head butting. Sheep will butt heads with one another to gain position and assert authority. Male sheep especially like to butt heads, but in people, we all do that, don’t we? A shepherd knows his sheep will clash sometimes and he can’t prevent it, so he puts oil or grease on their heads so that when they clash, their heads glance off without doing much harm.

Since we can't always avoid disagreements, the we can 'grease the disagreement' with prayer with and for one another to keep us from harming each too much when we butt heads.

We do this because we are trying to be like the GOOD SHEPHERD and not just the hired hand. We do this because we know only too well that our fellow humans can be a little erratic from time to time and we will not send them away.

We do this so that when WE get erratic, somebody will be the wise GOOD SHEPHERD and pull us back.

We do this because Christ, the manager tells us that God, the boss wants the world run this way.

We do this because we have the choice to listen and we choose to listen.

We do this because, as it turns out, the word smack dab in the middle of Psalm 23 is 'with'. God in Christ with us... us with each other. THERE IS ONLY 'with'. The Holy Spirit is with us; the love of God is now ours to steward. Let us live with that spirit, with compassion, generosity, trust, and courage; and lay down our lives that have already been raised up.

But sometimes, somehow, our camel get untied ... I offer this insight from Persian spiritual poet, Hafez, called "SOMEONE UNTIED YOUR CAMEL"

*I cannot sit still with my countrymen in chains.
I cannot act mute
Hearing the world's loneliness
Crying near the Beloved's heart.
My love for God is such
That I could dance with Him tonight without you,
But I would rather have you there.*

Is your caravan lost?

*It is,
If you no longer weep from gratitude or happiness,
Or weep
From being cut deep with the awareness
Of the extraordinary beauty
That emanates from the most simple act
And common object.*

My dear, is your caravan lost?

*It is if you can no longer be kind to yourself
And loving to those who must live
with the sometimes difficult task of loving you.
At least come to know
That someone untied your camel last night
For I hear its gentle voice
Calling for God in the desert.
At least come to know
That Hafiz will always hold a lantern*

*With galaxies blooming inside
And that
I will always guide your soul to
The divine warmth and exhilaration
Of our Beloved's
Tent.*

YOUR FRIEND

AMEN

WE SING OUR HYMN OF RESPONSE,

#357 How Sweet the name of Jesus Sounds