

10-11 #25

Reflections on Shepherds and Sheep

Psalm 23

Acts 2:42-47

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God”

My dear ones, it has been lovely knowing you, but according to Harold Camping, the world will begin to come to an end this Saturday. In case you haven't already heard on the news, this man changed his mind about his predictions after failing in 1994 when he initially said was the end. And since this text has something to do with soteriology – that is, the study of religious doctrines of salvation – it seemed like a good time to mention this news item.

We have all heard of the various “End of the World” prophecies throughout human history. It seems that every millennial change, every time there is a series of catastrophes, whenever a group of people are feeling particularly vulnerable, they seek and end to their worries and a way to feel powerful at the same time. Since long before Jesus' time there have been such dire warnings. And that is why John wrote this passage in the way he did. It is a way of calming the population and warning humanity to beware of messianic pretenders.

This text makes it clear who Jesus is. He is the one who they know by his voice, he calls them by name, they trust him because he cares for them. If we were to add here the words from the 23rd Psalm we would know even more of what the relationship is like between the Shepherd and the Sheep – and that represents the relationship that those searching spiritual souls have with God – that is what is promised to all of us here today.

God as Shepherd – provides what we need; a calm place to restore our souls, protection, a sense of security, a provident power who is capable of being with us all the days of our lives. It is the searching for the voice of God – the desire to trust and rest in God's holy space which guides us away from all that causes us pain in this world.

From the Epistle 1 Peter we heard, “For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.” **The wisdom of the Shepherd comes from the attentiveness that we develop during life. We are paying special attention to God's creations – animal vegetable and mineral – and how our lives are affected by them. It is a wonderful and glorious adventure, if we can trust that there is a greatness awaiting us at some point after the struggles.**

In our faith tradition we have Jesus who suffered greatly, and it was because of his suffering and his returning from the ultimate end that people believed that he could be trusted. His suffering was not a sign that he failed – it was a sign that God is with us and shares our pain and offers us the promise that our hope will not be forever denied.

Have you ever seen a herd of sheep grazing peacefully in a field and then suddenly someone get spooked and the whole herd runs around in a panic? They will follow the leader into danger even - in a panic! So having a Shepherd who can show us how to maintain grace under pressure – to seek and trust a Lord who is calm, is in communication and believes that there will be a glorious outcome eventually is vital to the sheep.

That is one of the main reasons I do not ever believe it when someone starts screaming and panicking about some end of the world prophecy – because they do not display the characteristics of a Good Shepherd. Anxiety, hysteria and a sense of power is what the false prophets desire – they do not desire to bring their sheep to a greater sense of Being with God. Our spiritual teacher, brother, Lord said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” He exemplified the peaceful leader that we can trust, because abundant life comes not with lots of toys and power – but with that excruciatingly moment of ecstasy when you know you have touched the power of God.

What is also not to be forgotten, though, is that we are not only called to be sheep and to trust and follow our guide to eternity, but also – we will be called to shepherd others. That is what happens when you gain trust and awareness – one naturally feels the desire to help others. When you have experienced the pain of the world, and know how difficult it can be to overcome the judgment and the merciless hopelessness . . . when you have found a way to walk through that gate with an awareness of what lie ahead, then people will follow you until they can walk on their own.

But ever remember that sheep are tremendously social. They can become tremendously distraught if separated from the rest. For it is in a group that they are safest. When feeling the treat of a predator they will all run away, following the one in front of them, until they are safely away. Then they will all stop and stare at the cause for alarm together – synchronized - making the impression of one giant multi-eyed mass. They are safer in numbers and have more of a chance to be aware of a danger when all the ears and eyes are alert.

We are all Sheep at times, and sometimes we can be Shepherds, but it is hard to know always, when we are what . . . especially when we think of the log in our own eyes blocking our view of the splinter in our neighbors. This is why humility is so vital, why grace must abound and judgment removed from our hearts.

In a group of Shepherds and Sheep, we can be aware of when there is a danger to God’s creation – and we can best work together to deal with the problem. This is one reason why participating in a faith community can be of great importance.

Another reason is for our own guidance and help as sheep. I received this story from Janice Seaman in an email and thought it would be good to place here as an example of the advantages of being a sheep.

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit her. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the woman at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for her pastor's visit, the woman welcomed her, led her to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made herself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, she contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone then she sat back in her chair, still silent. The hostess watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead. Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The pastor glanced at her watch and realized it was time to leave. She slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

The Lord is our Shepherd – and we can trust that together we can be led to wonderful fields of green and to relish the abundant life of grace and comfort together.

And I WILL see you next Sunday –and for many years to come – have no fear! We are loved by God – there is no end to that life abundant!