

John 10: 11-18 "The Good Shepherd" Rev. Janet Chapman 4/26/26

A pastor was in the midst of a tirade against the world's evils on a post-Easter Sunday, lamenting how awful things had become in society. He listed how we so desperately need a good shepherd to guide us through life, with all the wolves and careless hired hands lurking around to take us down or take advantage of us. After listing a series of examples of wolves and hired hands, with a heavy heart, he tried to drive home his point. Taking a great deal of dramatic license, he pleaded, "Oh, friends, if Jesus only knew what was going on in our country, he would turn over in his grave!"

On this post-Easter Sunday, where we continue to explore the mysterious power of resurrection, where Jesus no longer remains in the grave, we might wonder why we have a story about Jesus, sheep and shepherds? I believe it has something to do with coming to a new understanding of our human experience. Using sheep, wolves, and shepherds as a metaphor for life, Jesus is attempting to teach us how our future might look different from our past when we follow the Good Shepherd. All of us have some form of pain in our past, some situations where it felt like wolves were circling and we were defenseless to their attacks. We have lived through the trauma of trusting wolves that came at us in sheep's clothing. Our past carries some heavy baggage...people we have trusted let us down, we received messages that we weren't worthy, leaders have cast hopeful visions then left us when the going got tough, death has been a final, irreversible loss. We have been like sheep without a shepherd more than once in our lives. We have been shepherds who worry about the sheep in our lives who are in danger. We don't have to be in agriculture to understand the struggles our neighbors face who fear for their livestock killed by wolves coming in packs to feed. Thousands of dollars are being lost and just recently, the state legislature has been debating a humane solution for all involved, including the wolves.

Jesus' audience understood this all too well. Therefore, when Jesus described a shepherd who fell down on the job, who didn't pay enough attention or care very much for the sheep, who saw danger coming and ran away instead of staying to guard the flock, people in the crowd looked at each other and nodded in grim familiarity – that

kind of behavior was far too common, and it put not just the sheep in jeopardy, but the entire society that depended on the work of the shepherd for food and financial sustainability. By contrast, Jesus told the crowd, he was a “good shepherd,” and becoming part of his “flock” meant he would never let his followers down. In fact, he told them he’d go so far as to sacrifice his very life to show them the way of love, lived out in real time right in front of them. As the Good Shepherd, he will help fight off those voices that tell you and me we are going to hell in a hand basket. With his rod and staff, the Good Shepherd provides hope that war and devastation, hunger and pain will cease; that there is more to life than the suffering we have experienced; that those past voices lied to us when they said we have nothing to offer the world and it will only offer us unhappiness and pain. The Good Shepherd says he will lay down his life to prove the world’s voices are wrong.

So why wouldn’t everyone just flock (pardon the pun) to such a shepherd? Since Christ has so much to offer, why aren’t more folks hanging on his every word, why haven’t more found comfort and strength in his body represented in the church? Here in this body, we are back to our usual numbers on a Sunday morning, unlike a few Sundays ago when this place was packed to the rafters. Every Christmas and Easter, we have our regulars who show up then, but never the rest of the year. I’d like to think they get so much out of those services that they don’t need to come during the year, that they have enough meaning in their lives that, when they wake up in the middle of the night and contemplate their lives, they feel no anxiety, worry, or doubt, because they have a deep peace and contentment in following the Good Shepherd every step of their lives. I suspect, however, that they are really just like the rest of us. They have periods of confusion, anxiety, a real need for community, and a growing, not stagnant, relationship with God. They, like us, know what it is to run out of fuel, to be lied to, to have experienced, as Paul Scott Wilson calls it, a genuine “dead end” in life. They have forgotten that Jesus is no longer dead in the grave. I liken it to navigating a particular suburb in Anderson nearest to the fairgrounds where every other road leads to a dead end. Without GPS, it’s almost impossible to find your way out. But some

people continue to take the paths to dead ends rather than let them become a thing of the past. Some grow so busy with the demands of living that they don't recognize their deep need to be a part of a faith community. Some never knew there were folks like you who would rally around someone in the flock needing support after surgery and 12 volunteers step up! Maybe they didn't realize the positive vibes and hope that come from providing housing to low income seniors, helping start a microshelter and then supporting its residents, giving food to those on the streets through Hope Van, sending kids off to church camp, providing safe space for those society shuns, or working as a team to raise funds to ensure God's love can be shared with all, and all means all. Maybe they have listened too long to the voices of other shepherds who claim there are more worthy things in which to pay attention; maybe the whole part of taking faith seriously is just too scary.

Yet that doesn't mean Christ has forgotten them. It's one of the reasons I love this passage. Jesus says, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." There is no limit Jesus makes here, he just says I will bring them also; no prerequisites to who gets in the flock and who doesn't – he loves them all just as God does. The sheep in our passage are those who have reached dead ends in life, in their past and present. At some point, each and every person, either in this life or the next, comes to understand that because of what Christ did on the cross and what God did in the tomb, there are no more ultimate dead ends for anyone. That kind of love is beyond our understanding, beyond our experience on this earth, but to the Good Shepherd, it is the only kind of real love. But please don't mistake this reality to mean we do whatever we want on this earth. Wolves are still active and present, irresponsible and deceptive hired hands still negate our well-being in this world. Every day, we see examples in the news of bad shepherding. A young person is in the driver's seat driving home after partying all night with 3 friends in the car; his actions result in their deaths. Politicians focus on finding chinks in one another's armor rather than finding solutions to the nation's injustices. Pastors abuse their positions and

take advantage of vulnerable people. Bad shepherds. To counter their influences and find that peace which surpasses understanding *before* our body ceases to function, we need a Good Shepherd and a community which nurtures and supports our journey. We need that oneness of the flock which helps us find meaning, brings recovery from our broken dreams, and helps heal us from loss, guilt, loneliness and addiction. We need that Shepherd who promotes justice for the poor; protection for the immigrant; and doesn't flip their opinion based on the winds of popularity. The hired hands that leave on a whim, the wolves that devour without mercy are a part of the past when we give the Good Shepherd a chance. But what about our future, Rev. Amy Butler asks?

Long before Jesus walked this earth, there was man named David who knew that the voice of God was the only compelling voice in human experience with integrity and life-giving love. In his past, David had certainly followed the wrong voices, letting his greed and lust get the best of him. But he was also the one who, one night, picked up his harp and began to think about his former life as a shepherd. David, now a king, sat on the royal throne with all those distracting voices of international strife, power-hungry advisors, and needy people ringing in his ears – it was the soundtrack of his life. So as he reflected, maybe he realized it was really the voice of God who led him out of his own shame, pain and confusion. Possibly then it occurred to him that God had been like a good shepherd in his own life so he started to pluck on those harp strings singing, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul...” You heard it sung earlier concluding with “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” That is a hopeful future, for sure. Whatever the pain of your past, no matter how dead ends you have encountered, it does not have to be the story of your future. Too much energy gets wasted traveling those dead-end roads. There is a good shepherd, a resurrected shepherd, inviting us to write a different future for ourselves and our world. The question is whether we will have the courage to follow that Good Shepherd, staying connected to God's one boundless flock, into a life of abundant joy and well-being.