

Hespeler, 3 May 2020 © Scott McAndless
Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

The sheep huddle up close together with each other. There is a great deal of comfort in being here warm, safe and secure in the sheepfold. They are protected behind the fences and the gate. They know that the world outside of the fold can be very dangerous. Sheep are naturally skittish and timid creatures – and not without good reason, of course! When they are out in the hills and valleys, it can seem as if everything is out to get them: wolves, coyotes and lions. They can never relax. But here, in the fold it is so different, and they feel as if they can let their guard down.

So, the fold is good, but lately they have been feeling as if it has been a little bit too much of a good thing. There has been word out in the hills and dales lately of a new ravenous beast – something called a covid monster – that has been terrorizing sheep everywhere. So, the flock has been under lockdown for what seems like forever. And, as safe as it is, the fold gets a little bit tired sooner or later. Yes, the straw that has been gathered and brought in for them fills their stomachs and keeps them alive, but it is nothing like the tender grasses of the hillsides with which they long to fill their bellies. Water in the trough keeps them going but tastes nothing like the waters of a cold mountain stream.

And so lately there has been a lot of bleating in the flock, various sheep complaining about the shepherd and his policies. “This is ba-a-a-d,” they say. “The job of a shepherd is not just to keep us sa-a-a-fe, it’s not just to give us life. He’s supposed to give us life more abundantly. Life more abundantly includes lying down in green pastures and walking beside still waters, it means travelling down right paths with his rod and his staff to comfort us. We just can’t live that kind of abundant life if we can’t even get out of the fold. This is ba-a-a-a-a-h!

So, there is a lot of discontent – and not without some good reason! For it is true that sheep are not made only to shelter in the fold. Safety is good, but when you are *only* taking care of safety, you can never truly fulfill your purpose. But how to balance that need for green pastures with the requirement of safety in dangerous times? That is a question that the poor sheep cannot answer, and they are becoming frustrated and restless. And so perhaps it is not surprising that when the dissenting voices begin to be heard, some listen.

Where the voices are coming from, I do not know, but I have some suspicions. Maybe they are Russian wolves who are once again



seeking to stir up trouble, or perhaps they are secretly funded by the corporations who know that their profits will continue to plummet so long as the sheep are not out in the fields. But wherever they are coming from, those voices are being heard within the flock.

And sheep, well, here is the thing about sheep. They are social animals. They like to think that they are rational and that they do things because they decide that they are logical and reasonable. But they mostly act in certain ways because they want to belong to the group.

Did you know there was a story from about fifteen years ago about a flock of sheep in Turkey who were left grazing near a cliff. At some point, one of those sheep apparently decided to jump off the cliff. No one knows why, maybe it was suicidal or maybe it was just a misstep, but it was only one sheep and not the end of the world. But guess what happened next. One by one, the rest of the sheep, 1,500 of them, calmly followed the leader over that cliff. Over a thousand sheep died that day and a third of them only survived because the pile of sheep at the bottom of the cliff had gotten so big that their fall wasn't so bad.

But that is sheep for you. Their need to belong is so great that it can easily trump logic and reason. So, some in their frustration begin to listen to those strange voices. And others, out of that deep desire to belong, listen to them. There have always been thieves who have come to steal and kill and destroy. They have always been interested in using and manipulating the sheep to their own ends and to their own profits. They have gotten particularly good in recent years at manipulating the sheep to vote for certain parties and policies that hurt the sheep more than helped them.

They manipulate through social media with techniques like astroturfing – creating fake groups that make certain opinions seem more popular. Sheep are always looking for greener pastures, so they easily fall for astroturfing. Or the thieves might use clickbait – drawing people into conversations by posting stories and memes that are so intriguing people can't help but click on them but then they get sucked into conversations where, again, they start to feel like they have to go along with some pretty crazy notions in order to fit in.

It might be true that sheep **“will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”** But we seem to be living in strange times where the really good thieves have been very creative about using the flocking instinct to get the sheep to listen to them anyways.

Now, I'll be honest with you all here. I don't speak to you today from outside of the fold. I am just another sheep who is under lockdown with the rest of you. I feel the same frustration that you do at not being able to go out and frolic in green pastures and lie down beside still waters. It is making me very discontent as well.

I will also confess that I have the same flocking instinct as all of the rest of you sheep in here. I do love to think that all of my actions and decisions are driven by my intellect, knowledge and reason. But the honest truth is that I am very much influenced by what my friends think and the particular sources of information that just feel right to me. Because of this, it is quite possible that I will not act in rational or even sensible ways. That's where we all are right now.

But here is also the reality of our present situation: the covid monster is still ravaging the hills and dales out there. We will indeed be able to leave the safety and security of the sheepfold at some point. But it matters a great deal whose voice we listen to when it comes to being called to go out of the gate of that sheepfold. So how, in these complex times, and given our flocking instinct, will we know which voice to listen to?

There is one who is called the Good Shepherd who has the sort of voice we need to listen for. And how can we tell? What makes the good shepherd's voice different from the voices of thieves and robbers? Good Shepherds know the sheep – know them so well that he can call each one by name. That is the first thing we sheep must look for. And I fear that many of the voices that are now calling us sheep to go out of the fold, do not know us.

Even more damning, they are not really interested in us sheep. Oh, they might be interested in our wool or our milk or our meat, they might be interested and how they will be able to profit from what we do out there in the dangerous hills and dales, but they are not interested in us – in our hopes and dreams and aspirations. They may be interested in the abundance of their own goods and possessions, but they are not interested in making sure that we have life and have it abundantly.

That is key thing about the Good Shepherd. The thief may come only to steal and kill and destroy. The Good Shepherd comes that they may have life and have it abundantly. I would suggest to you that any who are arguing that we need to trade life for abundance in terms of a stronger economy have fundamentally misjudged the needs of such a moment.

For this is how you will ultimately know the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down the shepherd's own life for the sheep. You see, if there are any calculations to be made in terms of paying with lives for the opportunity to exit the safety of this fold, the Good Shepherd sees those calculations in a very different light. The Good Shepherd is far more willing to put his or her own life on the line for the sake of the safety of us sheep. Now, how might that make us all hear a bit differently the voices that are calling us to exit the safety of this fold?

Yes, we will leave. And we will not leave without there being a cost in terms of life. That is just the reality when you are dealing with a monster as dreadful as the covid beast. The temptation might be to sacrifice the weak

and the vulnerable in order to make that transition. That is the calculation that a hired hand might make, one who has no real connection with us sheep. That is the calculation that might be made by leaders who have come to see themselves as serving whoever can pay them the most. But the Good Shepherd is different. The Good Shepherd is there to serve all of the sheep and, if there is a life calculation to be made, the Good Shepherd's own life will be laid down first.

So listen, will you? Listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd because, the fact of the matter is, the Good Shepherd is out there and is calling.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes seven "I am" statements. "**I am the light of the world,**" "**I am the bread of life,**" "**I am the vine,**" and "**I am the way, and the truth, and the life**" to name some of them. Each "I am" statement is a powerful metaphor that Christians have reflected upon and meditated on down through the centuries. But I would suggest to you that, maybe, one of the most powerful "I am" statements of all is, "**I am the Good Shepherd.**" but I wonder sometimes if we haven't missed some of the key meanings in that metaphor.

At least in my experience, most Christians seem to think of this saying of Jesus in terms of their own personal relationship. It's all about me and Jesus and what Jesus does for me and how I follow Jesus. In this regard, the idea of the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sake of his sheep certainly seems very meaningful and closely tied to the story of the death of Jesus for our sakes. That is all well and good, of course, and definitely a good part of the intended meaning of this saying.

Nevertheless, I would like us to remember that the obvious meaning of this metaphor makes us into sheep. And sheep are among the animals whose herding instinct is the strongest. Sheep, to put it bluntly, don't act simply as individuals. And I think any interpretation of this saying of Jesus that does not take that into account is deeply impoverished.

And it just really strikes me right now, when we are in the position where we find ourselves, that when we put ourselves in the shelter of the fold waiting for the Good Shepherd to come and open the gate so we might go out into the hills and valleys and experience life more abundantly, that maybe this saying of Jesus was also intended to teach us something about the kind of leaders that we look for and settle for in times of great peril.