Baa-Ram-Ewe

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

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There are some weeks in which it is really difficult to find a theme among the lectionary passages. John or I will sit down when it’s time to select the texts for the week, peruse the four options provided by our revised common lectionary, and say to ourselves, “What in the world? What is the connection here?” But today’s texts are different. I suspect that you were able to detect a theme in today’s Scripture passages…if not by my casual reference to the movie “Babe” in my sermon title...

It’s Shepherd Sunday! Every year, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, the lectionary texts feature the 23rd Psalm and either today’s text from John with Jesus being the Good Shepherd or from Revelation with the Lamb of God in the throne room. Every year, we are reminded during the Easter season that Jesus is the Good Shepherd — reminding us how he was willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

As is our habit, when Jesus speaks in metaphors, we try to figure out our own roles in Jesus’s words. If Jesus is the Good Shepherd — we assume that would make us the sheep: part of Jesus’s flock. We like that image...as long as we are one of the cute little lambs that Jesus is always pictured with wearing around his neck. We like it when we are cute, fluffy little lambs, dutifully following Jesus wherever he goes.

But for most, if not all of us, the reality of our existence as sheep is a little less flattering. Being a shepherd means dealing with animals who are wholly dependent upon you so that they don’t make fatal mistakes. Because...they will.

There’s a popular video that went around the interwebs this week, shared gleefully on Facebook this week by pastors anticipating the upcoming Shepherd Sunday. The beginning of the video shows a shepherd and a sheep who is stuck in a very narrow crevice. The shepherd pulls and pulls on one of the hind legs of the sheep, eventually putting a leather strap around its leg to help with traction. After many, many tugs, the sheep is finally freed.

He goes bounding off, happy to be free, leaping and jumping with what appears to be pure joy. That is until….the happy little sheep, bounding blissfully along, dives headfirst back into the very same crevice from which it had just been pulled, finding itself stuck in the exact same position once again, just a few yards farther down the line.

You gotta feel for the shepherd in that moment. All of the work that went into freeing the sheep —- only for it to land itself in trouble again not 10 seconds later.

We’d like to think we’d never be so careless or stupid as the sheep in that video but, isn’t that the same way with all of us? Isn’t that why we have confession each week? After our Call to Worship and our opening hymn, we go into a time of confession — confessing all the ways in which we choose to love other things rather than God, neighbor, and ourselves. We have to confess each week because...we mess up *each week*.

When I was an 8th grade English teacher, the time of confession took on a special significance for me. I don’t know if you know this, but sometimes 8th graders and their teachers don’t get along super well. The benediction that I use at the end of each service in which I preach is the same one that one of our associate pastors used whenever she preached. I remember being in worship each week while I was teaching and praying that God would help me greet the Christ in each student that I met that week. I would pray for forgiveness for the many times that I became impatient and lost my temper, for the times in which I was sarcastic, for the times in which I neglected to show Christ-like love to my students. I would pray the same types of prayer every single week.

Then sure enough, at around 7:30 the next morning, when I was planted in the hallway, coffee mug in hand, smile on my face, ready to greet my crew of 8th graders, one my students would look at me and say something like, “Gee, Ms. Wolf, you look tired...have you had your coffee today?” Or when, and this is a true story, upon learning that another teacher was pregnant, a student looked me up and down and said I’d been having an awful lot of mood swings lately...when those things happened, I’d say to myself, “Well, at least I can have my time of confession on Sunday and try again next week.”

Sure enough, not 24-hours after the Sunday morning confessions, I would find myself once again, face first in the same crevice, messing up once again.

Thing about that video with the sheep is, we don’t get to see the shepherd pull the sheep out a second time, but I fully assume that he will. Because that’s what shepherds do: they will never stop trying to save their sheep. Even when the sheep are in danger because of their own stupidity, the shepherd will pull them out of the same crevice, rescue them from the same cliff, search them out in the same cave time and time again.

That is the assurance that we have when we make our confessions each week: the Good Shepherd is ready to pull us out of the crevice each and every time and set us back on right paths. In Will Willimon’s book, “The Gospel for the Person Who Has Everything,” which some Covenant members read in January, Willimon suggests that perhaps confession sequences should *begin* with an assurance of pardon. He says that it is only *because* we know we are assured of God’s pardon and God’s grace and mercy, that we can confidently confess our sins. God forgives us first. We confess out of gratitude for that forgiveness.

A few minutes ago, we heard the familiar words of the 23rd Psalm - a favorite of many. The final verse says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” It’s a beautiful thought. But the Hebrew actually means more along the lines of “goodness and mercy are *chasing after me* all the days of my life.” God is regularly chasing after us, even when we make the most ridiculous of mistakes.

As one commentary writer notes, “The relationship between the sheep and the shepherd is based on what the shepherd does, rather than on what the sheep do…[Thanks be to God.]...It’s all about who the shepherd is rather than who we are.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Who is the Good Shepherd? A person who the sheep trust. A person in relationship with the sheep. A person who will search far and low for one missing sheep. A person whose flock includes not only the ornery sheep who makes poor choices, but also the outcast sheep, the sick sheep, the lost sheep — the sheep that the rest of the flock has deemed unworthy to be among them. The Good Shepherd understands that sheep are gonna sheep and the Good Shepherd is ready to step in to guide the sheep back into the fold when that happens.

In contrast to the Good Shepherd is the hirelings who are placed in direct opposition of the Good Shepherd in Jesus’s parable. They can’t be trusted because they don’t own the sheep. They don’t have the same vested interest as the Good Shepherd does. Their motivations are flawed. They can lead the sheep astray.

Theologian Debie Thomas likens the hirelings to the sirens in the Odyssey, tempting the sheep away with false protection. She asks of herself, “What siren songs call to me, making seductive promises I shouldn’t trust? Money? Success? Physical attractiveness? Prestige? Politics? Racial, cultural, or national identity? These are biggies,” Thomas says, “easiest to name. What else calls to me, promising a version of love that is ultimately thin, cheap, fragile, and unsafe?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In today’s world, it is really difficult at times to discern between the Good Shepherd and the siren songs of the hirelings. Because they seem to be everywhere — convincing us that they have all the right answers for everything. But if we follow down those paths, we will soon see that we have followed hollow promises. None of those things Thomas mentions — money, success, prestige, etc., will promise us the version of love that the Good Shepherd offers.

Some of you (myself included at times) may not love being called “sheep.” In fact in recent years, it’s become a bit of an insult. People who are eager to get the vaccine in order to protect themselves and their loved ones are called “sheeple” by anonymous critics online. But I would argue being called one of Christ’s sheep isn’t an insult at all...because perhaps our view of sheep is backwards, literally.

In her sermon, “The Voice of the Shepherd,” theologian Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a member of her church who actually had experience with sheep while growing up on a sheep ranch. This member told her that cattle farmers had made up the claim that sheep were stupid because they had approached herding sheep in the same way that they had approached herding cattle. They would approach the flock of sheep from behind with shouts and prods much like they would their own head of cattle. But they learned that that does not work with sheep. They learned that if they stood behind the sheep, making their cowboy noises, the sheep would just run around behind the cowboys. Sheep prefer to be led. As Taylor explained it, “Cows can be be pushed; sheep must be led. Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else—their trusted shepherd—does not go first, to show them that everything is all right.” Barbara Brown Taylor continues, “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.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

We hear this perhaps best in yet another phrase of Psalm 23- “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil...for you are with me.” Because we can trust in God the Good Shepherd and Christ the Good Shepherd, we can trust that the paths on which we are led are the right paths of love, justice, and truth.

Being a part of Christ’s flock means being willing to be led by him. It means trusting him and being in relationship with him. In a world in which the siren songs of the hirelings might seem loudest, we must stick on the path of the Good Shepherd, listening only for his voice, and trusting that he will always lead us to love.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Feasting on the Word; Nancy Blakeley [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2990 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Barbara Brown Taylor; “The Voice of the Shepherd” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)