

Awesome Shepherd, Wayward Sheep

This morning, John's Gospel presents Jesus in what may be his most popular persona: the good shepherd. Reverend James Liggett offers some pithy observations about the good shepherd in his 2015 sermon, "Wool and Mutton." Liggett writes, "[o]ver the centuries, the image of Jesus as the good shepherd and his followers as sheep has been, for whatever reasons, terribly appealing. The amount of stained glass, painting, music and poetry that it has inspired is truly staggering, and the number of sermons, articles, hymns, retreats and meditations devoted to it is doubtless vast beyond measure. So, it's with great trepidation that any preacher wanders into this particular pasture and tackles these particular critters. You need to watch where you step."

If you're devoted to the idea of Jesus as your good shepherd, you may not like this sermon, so let me apologize now to whomever I'm about to offend. It's not that I object to the concept of the good shepherd – far be it from me to tell Jesus what metaphors to use. His rhetorical choices are vastly above my pay grade. My problem is that the theme of "Jesus the Good Shepherd" has been used so much in Christian literature, music, and art that its power has been submerged in a vast sea of sentimental syrup. It's not unlike *The Sound of Music*. Rogers and Hammerstein wrote a wonderful show with beautiful songs, but if I never hear "do, a deer, a female deer..." piped into an elevator again, I'll be sincerely grateful. So, let's scrape some of the sugar off the Good Shepherd this morning and see what we find underneath.

Our Gospel passage is excerpted from Jesus's argument with the Pharisees after he heals the man born blind. They're upset, as always, that Jesus has broken the Sabbath, and a little unnerved that he was able to cure the man's congenital blindness. They think he must be cheating somehow. Jesus is frustrated, as always, by the Pharisees' limited vision and their refusal to accept that Adonai prefers healing, even on the Sabbath. So, when Jesus calls himself the good

shepherd, he's taking a none-too-subtle shot at the Pharisees' priorities around pastoral care. He's also claiming a role that we might not recognize, but that the Pharisees immediately would.

As Reverends Eric Fistler and Robb McCoy pointed out this week on their *Pulpit Fiction* podcast, pagan kings in biblical times liked to pretend they were gods. Caesar and Pharaoh both made that claim. But in Israel, where only Adonai was God, a good king was a shepherd to his people. References to shepherd kings appear throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in Isaiah and Ezekiel. Moses, the great lawgiver, discovered the burning bush when he was out tending sheep. David, who started life as a shepherd boy, became the greatest king the Hebrew people ever had. When Jesus claims to be the good shepherd, he's also implicitly claiming the mantle of a king. That, we know, drives Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin right up the wall.

And Jesus isn't claiming to be just a "good" shepherd. There's nothing wrong with the word "good" – it's a nice adjective that we use to praise everything from movies to dinners to our children and pets. But "good" isn't "great," and it isn't all of what Jesus meant. The Greek word that Jesus used is *kalos* (καλός). *Kalos* can mean "good," but it can also mean noble, honorable, worthy, beautiful, fine, proper, attractive, and appealing. Bible scholar David F. Ford likes the phrase "wonderful shepherd" to explain how Jesus is "divine and human, transcending the usual categories in remarkable ways." I agree and, though it may be too trendy or informal for some, I also like the phrase "awesome shepherd" because it captures the enormity of Jesus's unequalled goodness while reminding us that he deserves to be approached with reverence and praise.

No matter how awesome Jesus might be, though, why do we need a shepherd? Matthew tells us that Jesus had compassion for the people "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." That idea of people being "like sheep without a shepherd" comes straight out of the Hebrew Scriptures; it appears in 1 Kings, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. Those

passages describe “sheep without a shepherd” as scattered, aimless, and vulnerable to attack. Maybe that was true for people living under Roman occupation, but is it true for us?

None of us can answer that question because all of us have lived our entire lives in a culture where Jesus is widely portrayed as the good shepherd. Even if you weren't raised Christian or if you share my distaste for saccharine analogies, references to Jesus the Good Shepherd are everywhere. You've been influenced by them to at least some extent regardless of how you feel about them. You wouldn't be in church this morning if you couldn't at least tolerate them, though, so let's agree for the moment that Jesus is our awesome shepherd and turn our attention to what it means to be his sheep.

Much “Good Shepherd” art depicts Jesus holding a rescued lamb in one of two positions. In many modern pictures, Jesus cradles the lamb against his chest like one of Lady Gaga's lap dogs. The more traditional pose shows Jesus striding along with the rescued lamb slung across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. As the Reverend Jazzy Bostock observes in her sermon this morning, both images raise questions. Are we really like that docile lamb in the pictures? Bostock writes, “I think it is likely that the lamb is bleating for dear life – perhaps even wriggling around, trying to get free ... Maybe you like to believe that when Jesus carries you, you are well-behaved and soft ... In reality, though, perhaps all of us bleat and wriggle a whole lot, finding it hard to give up control.” Our need for control may explain why we sometimes resist the idea of needing a shepherd, but the mistakes we so often make explain why we do.

Ours is a world of green pastures and still waters as well as shadowy valleys where predators and enemies lurk. We don't always know where we are, and we're easily lured into dark places by all the distractions the world has to offer. If we let him, our awesome shepherd leads us into safe, tranquil settings. He carries his shepherd's staff to pull us out of the difficult,

dangerous situations into which we sometimes wander, and a strong rod to drive away predators that threaten our physical health and peace of mind. We aren't mindless, as sheep are wrongly thought to be, but we can be short-sighted, capricious and stubborn. Human beings are wayward; we are blessed to have an awesome shepherd who willingly lays down his life to bring us home.

This morning's readings make several references to "laying down one's life," so let's look at what that means. Jesus laid down his life in his Passion, and there's more to it than that. Jesus also put aside his own preferences to tend to people when he saw them "harassed and helpless." In moments when he might have been desperate for rest or time with his Father in prayer, Jesus nonetheless went out to teach and preach. He healed the sick and the injured even when he might have preferred to avoid yet another confrontation with the religious authorities. Laying down one's life isn't necessarily about dying. It can also be about putting aside personal priorities to care for others, or taking chances when we'd rather play it safe.

When Peter confronted the Temple authorities in our passage from Acts, he was laying down his life. Knowing they might do to him what they did to Jesus, Peter let the Holy Spirit speak through him anyway. This wasn't typical Peter impulsiveness; it was divine courage that left the authorities completely nonplussed. It's also more than the Spirit is likely to ask of us. God usually wants us not to die for him, but to live for him. When John urges us to lay down our lives for each other, he's not asking us to martyr ourselves. He's telling us to share what we have, and to trust God enough to ask boldly for whatever we need. Laying down our lives for Jesus means putting aside the wayward impulses that always seem to end up stranding us in shadowy places. It means listening for the sound of our awesome shepherd's voice, then following him as he leads us to care for one another and to love in truth and action as well as in speech, until we eventually come, under his care, to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.