

Of Shepherds and Earth – April 22, 2018 – John 10:11-18

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one that is familiar to us. Perhaps it is even one of the titles we most often associate with Jesus. We've all probably seen pictures of Jesus holding a lamb, gently stroking its soft wool. We know from reading the gospels that Jesus often used stories and parables with shepherds and sheep as characters. In fact, as Luke tells us, shepherds were some of the first people to lay eyes on the baby Jesus soon after he was born. Sheep are abundant in Israel as are shepherds.

This title of Good Shepherd also links Jesus to the Old Testament figure David, the shepherd boy who was the youngest in his family, and who became the most beloved king in Israel's history. Besides being a king, David was also known for writing psalms, and his 23rd psalm is also well-known to us. Having been a shepherd himself, David would have understood the role quite well.

In the hierarchy of society, shepherds were looked down upon. Mainly because they were often dirty and smelled bad. They tended to be gruff and coarse, living much of their lives only with sheep or other shepherds as company. They lived out on the margins and were treated that way. For Jesus to call himself a Good Shepherd would be abrasive to the social elite, who saw shepherds as menial.

But good shepherds were dedicated to the dangerous work of caring for their sheep. They were literally willing to lay down their lives for their flock. At night, shepherds would lead the flock into a cave for protection and then lay down at the opening of the cave to shield the sheep from any predators that came by looking for an easy meal. Additionally, a shepherd would train his flock to follow his voice. Often, a group of shepherds would band together at night to protect their sheep, their flocks intermingling, but in the morning, when it was time for the flocks to graze, a shepherd could call out to his sheep, and they recognized his voice and would follow him. Sheep are smart creatures. They grow to trust their shepherd, seeing him as a member of their family, and they won't go anywhere without first being led there by their shepherd. (Info from Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Voice of the Shepherd.")

Knowing this, it is easy to see why Jesus chose this image for himself. And perhaps it clarifies the truly intimate relationship between shepherd and sheep within the 23rd Psalm. Being a shepherd wasn't simply a 9 to 5 job. It was an ongoing role and lifestyle in the life of the shepherd.

Jesus would have been very familiar with King David and his psalms. He would have seen the depth of the personal relationship between God and humanity, especially in the words and images of the 23rd Psalm. The psalmist expresses absolute trust, putting God in the role of shepherd, caring for every intimate detail of his life. Finding a lush place to graze and cool water to drink – leading him along safe paths – walking alongside him in times of trial – calming his fears – preparing him to face whatever life brings his way. The psalmist details a life that is in ongoing companionship and care received from his loving God. The psalmist can remain confident that God leads him on his journey of life, even unto death.

Of course, in the analogies of both of these passages, we are the sheep. And whether we acknowledge it or not, we do indeed follow the voices of one or more shepherds in our lives. As Jesus warns, some voices that we follow are more like the hired hand, rather than the shepherd, who is happy to lead, until the bad times come and he runs off, leaving the sheep to be devoured by wolves.

We come to church and are part of this community of faith in order to better hear the voice of our shepherd, the Good Shepherd. We learn that in him we can place our trust, and by following him, we will be learning to carry out the will of God of in our lives and in this world. When we go astray, listening for a time, to the other voices that lure us to follow, we can again turn our ears back to listen for the voice of Christ. He will never abandon us. In fact, he looks for us, the lost sheep, when we wander off the path.

Now today, April 22nd is officially Earth Day, first recognized back in 1970. It seems somewhat strange to me that we have to actually set aside a day to be mindful of this world we all call home. Yet in the more recent centuries, with the development of industrialization, humanity has reached a point in our evolution of actually being able to affect the world on a level never before known or imagined. And so on Earth Day we are encouraged to take a hard look at our impact on creation.

I am not a scientist nor an environmentalist, so I can't give you all the facts and statistics. But I can tell you this. I have heard about environmental concerns my entire life. Anyone around my age and younger can say the same thing.

When I read the 23rd Psalm, the first image that strikes me is creation – I think of sheep, green pastures, still waters. That is a timeless image, isn't it? Or seemingly so. Consider this – it has only been recently in the lifeline of civilization that the possibility of disrupting those images by human invention and intervention has become a possibility. We humans are doing great harm to our world and to the other species of life that also call this world their home.

You all know this. I know I'm preaching to the choir.

But we have to think about it more than just one day a year. This task becomes even more difficult when our leaders do not acknowledge that there is a problem.

I don't know what the answer is. And I know that there is more than just one answer. I also know that there are people that are a whole lot smarter than me who are working to find answers. But if you were to ask me to name one question that keeps me up at night – it's this one. Perhaps more so than any issue that faces us as humanity, and yes, I know there are many. But what we as humanity are doing to this amazing creation that was given to us as our home and for us to care for, it breaks my heart. But there are actions that we all could be taking to make a difference.

Perhaps this issue is so close to me because it was in nature that I heard the first stirrings of God's voice calling out to me. It was through the immensity of the natural world that I first discovered God. And it is often through the natural world that God speaks to me still and where I find nourishment for my soul. But whatever the reason, caring for our world is part of who God calls us to be. It is one in which we can each take part in making a difference.

Let us follow our shepherd, and may the pastures ever remain green and lush, and the waters, still and clear.