

Shepherding Without Sheep

I have always been reluctant to spend much time on the subject of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. I'm just not into sheep as a metaphor for our time. It made sense when Jesus used it because the profession of caring for sheep was widely understood in his day, and so they would understand the full impact of the metaphor.

But for most of us in our urban-dominated society today, our experience with sheep is limited to such events as going over to Govin's near Menominee at lambing season to let a grandchild hold the cute little buggers. Through some effort, we might be able to comprehend the shepherd image, but we can't identify with it.

But what really gets me is that I could *never* refer to the congregation I serve as "my flock," and it irritates me when others do. It seems to me both arrogant and disrespectful. It plays into stereotypes about the church as mindless followers who are easily manipulated, and that doesn't come close to describing this congregation.

I don't even use the term "sheep-stealing" when talking about the practice of poaching another congregation's members.

All of which causes me problems whenever I am assigned to talk about the Good Shepherd. The one exception is when I preach on the 23rd Psalm at funerals, which happens often, because there is so much comfort in those words that I never need to comment at all about the image of sheep.

But this year I am a changed man. I am eager to preach on the Good Shepherd. All it took was to read this passage from John at the right time. I read these verses in the midst of hearing something about elephants from our pastoral transition consultant, something about sheepdogs from an Eau Claire police instructor, and while preparing for Earth Day.

All that has helped me do what I do with the 23rd Psalm at funerals: take the sheep out of good shepherding. It has given me a whole new perspective on why Jesus used this image.

At one session of our pastoral transition workshop last week, Dr. Pence presented the example of an elephant driver who guides the animal where it is supposed to go. The driver uses all his knowledge and experience to control the elephant, and most of the time a skilled driver can make it work.

But if the elephant, for whatever reason, decides to go its own way, there is nothing the driver can do to control it. Because the elephant is so much more powerful than the driver, in the end, what it decides is what will happen and there's nothing you can do about it.

Dr. Pence used this example to show how all of our efforts to employ reason and facts and logic to a situation will work most of the time. But when emotions come into play, that can all go out the window. Emotions are a much more powerful motivating factor than intellect.

When they take over there is no stopping them, and whether we like it or not, they must be taken into account

It occurred to me that my problems with the good shepherd image are largely intellectual. My objections make sense to me and I think I can support my view with the facts. But for many Christians, the good shepherd image is not an intellectual concept. It is an emotional one.

The emotional impact of a loving God who cares so much for me that even amid the worst of what I encounter in the world I am safe in God's arms is immensely comforting. We don't need to get into how dumb or helpless sheep are to experience that.

What counts is the knowledge that in the midst of grief, loss, or danger, or discouragement, no matter how hostile the world seems, God is there. God is concerned about me, and God will direct me in ways of peace and new life. There are times when each of us needs to hear and believe that.

And if that is the takeaway from the Good Shepherd story, far be it from me to diminish that in any way.

The night before Dr. Pence arrived, many of us were attending an active shooter training session. I admit, when Officer Eric Anderson started talking about how to protect the flock, meaning the congregation, I started grinding my teeth. But something about this use of the term struck me in a new way.

Anderson talked about levels of awareness concerning our surroundings. During a worship service, if we are doing it right, we are focusing our attention on God, not on our surroundings.

Acts of meditation, prayer, praise, and concentrating on the word of God are what bring us in closer communion with God. We want everyone who worships here to be able to do that. We do not want to be distracted by our surroundings.

Such a lack of awareness to surroundings, however, puts worshipping congregations in a vulnerable spot. We are not going to pick up on any warning signals that might alert us to a potential issue.

Anderson said that this vulnerability could be eliminated by the presence of what he called “a sheep dog:” A person who is not fully engaged in worship, but whose job is to look out for those who are.

What struck me was the word “vulnerable.” A shepherd’s job is to protect the vulnerable. Being vulnerable is great deal different from being stupid or easily manipulated. It is being exposed to harm from the world. Intelligent, thoughtful, God-loving people can be vulnerable.

Those who are struggling with heartbreak, disappointment, betrayal, or failure can be vulnerable. Those who are led astray by friends or mentors driven by hatred or fear are vulnerable. Vulnerability is not knowing where your next meal is coming from. Having no place to sleep. Living in fear of war or gangs, or peer pressure.

The shepherd’s job is to watch out for those in these vulnerable situations.

In John 10, Jesus makes a strong distinction between those who truly protect the vulnerable, and those who talk a good game but don’t really care about them. The hired hand provides protection only as a means to an end, to get a wage for himself. He will protect as long as the cost of doing so isn’t too high.

When the going gets tough, he’s out of there. Which applies to shepherding the vulnerable today. When protection of the vulnerable in society requires some sacrifice the hired hand is out of there.

When popular opinion starts to go against him, when people start bashing the poor, ridiculing them as leeches on society to feed their own prejudices, he won’t have their back. They’re on their own.

In contrast to that is the Good Shepherd—the one who not only *cares for* the vulnerable but *cares deeply about* them. The one who will protect them at all costs, even risking his life if necessary.

We don't need to analyze sheep dynamics to talk about how God sheds God's grace on the vulnerable. Jesus said, "I have come to bring good news to the poor, to help the blind to see, the lame to walk", in other words to advocate for those who have little and are most vulnerable to disease, death, hunger, and despair.

When Jesus declares himself as the Good Shepherd he is taking a stand for those on the margins and says he will have their back even when no one else does. The call to be disciples of Jesus puts the challenge to those of us who call ourselves Christians to do the same. To have their back even when nobody else does, even if it costs us something.

That brings us to the challenge of today, of Earth Day. What does it mean to be a Good Shepherd as it relates to the care of the earth? It has little to do with dumb, compliant sheep.

It has to do with protecting the vulnerable that have been entrusted to our care. And in the age of industrialized materialism, what is more vulnerable than the planet that has been entrusted to our care?

This idea of a vulnerable earth in need of care has been scoffed at for so many years. The early writers of Genesis, obsessed with survival in times of periodic famine, believed earth to be an adversary.

Their goal was to defeat famine. To be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over all living things. Almost as if nature were the enemy, in need of conquering rather than a sometimes vulnerable partner in need of care.

Were the bison on the Great Plains vulnerable? Ridiculous! There were so many of them. Shoot all you like. Until a way of life was shattered and a majestic species pushed to the edge of extinction.

Were the sardines of Monterrey Bay vulnerable? Ridiculous! There were so many of them. Fish all you want. Until an industry was destroyed and the fish pushed to the point of commercial extinction.

Are the forests of the earth vulnerable? Ridiculous! There are so many trees—the forests are so huge, you can cut and clear them all you want. Except that now they are disappearing at an alarming rate. Over 30,000 square kilometers of rain forest in Brazil alone are destroyed every year. How long do you think they will last at that rate?

Are the oceans vulnerable? Ridiculous! The oceans are so immeasurably huge, they can absorb whatever we throw at them. Except that with 1.4 billion tons of trash being dumped in them every year, the oceans are being strangled.

We now have the Pacific Trash Vortex, a huge swath of decomposing plastic nearly the size of Texas, growing in the northern Pacific Ocean. Chemical runoff has created more than 400 dead zones in the oceans where little or no marine life can exist, and that number is growing.

Is our climate itself vulnerable? Ridiculous! Our environment is so huge and climatic factors that influence it so immense it can absorb whatever we throw into it. Except that we now know that it cannot. Are we ever going to learn our lesson about the vulnerability of the earth?

I know there are people who question whether this Earth Day emphasis is a proper role for Christianity, that it is more of a science issue and wanders too close to the political arena.

If you believe that, you're going to have to argue with Albert Einstein, who wrote:

If we want to improve the world, we cannot do it with scientific knowledge but with ideals. We must begin with the heart of humanity—with the conscience. And the values of conscience can only be manifested by selfless service to humankind.

Religion and science go together. Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind.

Psalm 8 has this to say about the matter:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,

The moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them little less than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hand; you have put all things under their feet."

While that sounds very much like the Genesis statement of conquering the Earth, there's one key difference. "You have made humans very much like God in this relationship to creation."

And how does God act toward God's creation? Like a Good Shepherd. Who cares and loves and especially looks out for the vulnerable.

It is clear that the earth is in need of shepherds. Not hired hands, but Good Shepherds. The hired hand does not know what it means to protect the vulnerable. He is there to exploit the earth for what can be gained from it. He will protect it as long as he can profit from it and it does not inconvenience him personally to do so

He subscribes to Groucho Marx's tongue-in-cheek remark, "Why should I care about future generations? What have they ever done for me?"

A Good Shepherd is content with what God gives. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

A Good Shepherd is fearless. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

A Good Shepherd takes the paths of righteousness and restores the soul of a people that is lost and drowning in the pursuit of more and more material goods to be wrenched from the environment.

The Good Shepherd is willing to do whatever it takes, at whatever personal cost, to protect the vulnerable, whether that be our neighbor, those with whom we share this creation, or the planet itself.

The Shepherd does this knowing that in doing so, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.