

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year B) – April 26, 2015
Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

The Model Shepherd

Every year on this fourth Sunday of Easter, the gospel depicts Jesus as the Good Shepherd - with the implication that we are the sheep. As one observer writes,

“The sheep, a social animal, enjoys the comfort and companionship of the flock...Because the sheep is easily herded, it has acquired the reputation of meekness and passivity; a ‘sheep’ lacks initiative and discrimination, and the shadow aspect of a collective ‘flock’ is the inability of its members to think independently...One of our oldest, most enduring symbols is that of the divine Good Shepherd. Its continued potency could suggest a deep, collective longing to just be a child again. But it might alternatively suggest that to be shepherded by...[divine] guidance is...essential to survival and growth. In the same sense, the negative aspect of ‘wool-gathering’ is aimless daydreaming, where we can be led anywhere fantasy takes us.”ⁱ

Now having said that, I would think that we 21st century people, for the most part, have a tough time identifying ourselves as sheep. Images of being aimless, passive, dependent creatures, directed by another and eventually headed for the shearer or the butcher—these don't sit so well in our modern urban scene where our self-images are clearly unsheep-like. Our self-images include ingenuity, individuality, leadership, being free and self-directed, goal-driven, entrepreneurial and validated by achievement.

Can you imagine parents these days urging their children to be good sheep, to aim for conformity and mediocrity? We admire people with high levels of energy and a zest for independent exploration. No, to be a good sheep is not part of the American Dream! There is no such thing as an independent or self-made sheep.ⁱⁱ

If we have animal-like self-images these days it's more likely the speedy greyhound or busy beaver; independent cats, or the Energizer Bunny, or a rat on a tread wheel—you know, the “rat race.” Though before we dismiss this shepherd/sheep image altogether—before we let go of the idea that we humans are too sophisticated “to err and stray like lost sheep,” let's look at what this gospel text from John is really presenting to us, namely an image of Jesus as the good shepherd or model leader, and only indirectly, an allusion to sheep-like attributes that we may have. For the more we focus on Jesus as the good, or model, Shepherd,ⁱⁱⁱ the more we may understand something new about ourselves. Popular religious art has often distorted this biblical image by suggesting a meek herdsman carrying an even meeker limp lamb. *The shepherd in our text from John is just the opposite.* This strong and self-assured gospel shepherd is committed to his mission and is in command of his destiny. He defends his sheep even unto death because he knows them as intimately as his Divine Parent knows him. This shepherd also foresees a time when there will be one flock—unified yet diverse, with one shepherd. And when

death comes to the shepherd at last, it comes only because he, Jesus, has decided to lay down his life, a life the Risen Jesus takes up again. In laying down his life for his sheep, Jesus is at once entirely free and, at the same time, obedient to the will of God (John 10:17-18). Jesus was not the victim of circumstances beyond his control, nor did he function as a blindly obedient pawn. Indeed it was in his willing *obedience* to God's purpose of bringing the world into union and communion that Jesus found the *freedom* with which to lay down his life and to take it up again. Likewise, paradoxically, we also must find our freedom in obedience to the will – the desire - of God who has gifted us with a shepherd.

Now long before Jesus described himself as the good shepherd, the 23rd Psalm depicted God as the same.^{iv} When the 23rd psalm says “The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not be in want,” maybe it means that if we keep our eyes open, if we keep our hearts and lives open, we will at least never be in want of the one thing that in our heart of hearts we want—and need—more than anything else. Maybe it means that whatever else is withheld, the Good Shepherd never withholds himself, herself; and God the Shepherd is what we want—and need—more than anything else.

In the image of God as Shepherd, we begin to see that we are more like sheep than we would initially admit. We are often anxious, timid, greedy and foolish; we often panic easily, and refuse to be pushed; we often make many of our decisions based on our appetites. And as Barbara Taylor points out, we, too, tend to get into head-butting contests for no good reason at all.^v To be known, fully known—and loved—as the Shepherd knows and loves each of us is both painfully revealing and profoundly comforting. If we accept the humble status of sheep, we must then let our masks and defenses drop away and allow the Shepherd to occasionally poke us with his staff, and lead us beside the still waters, and restore our souls.^{vi}

Key to our understanding the full significance of this image of the model or good shepherd—and ourselves as God's sheep—is *an appreciation of the difference between shepherding and herding*. The action of *herding* implies a certain “pushed from behind” coercion whereby animals or people are moved from one place to another for the sake of expediency or because another wills it so. We can cite the horrific examples of the forced herding of persons, sometimes in the millions as in the Holocaust, or the gulags of Stalin, or the shanty-towns and bantustans of apartheid South Africa, or more recently in “ethnic cleansing” or socio-economic segregation—marked by ever higher fences and tighter borders—in so many parts of the world. On an exceedingly lighter level, travelers in several larger Asian cities experience the process of herding when they get on commuter trains. Mass transit companies in an effort to promote greater efficiency have resorted to hiring “professional pushers” whose job it is to pack each train car with as many people as possible. Needless to say, personal comfort is sacrificed to company profit, and dignity to punctuality.^{vii}

Shepherding, on the other hand, and as exemplified by Jesus, is based on a real relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. The shepherd knows them each by name, and there is no need for manipulative or coercive herding because the sheep

readily associate their shepherd's voice with food and water for their hunger and thirst, and healing for their wounds and compassionate caring when they have become lost and afraid. *They do not exist for the shepherd's sake but the shepherd for theirs*; and because of Jesus' personal involvement with them, the sheep willingly follow their shepherd, trusting in his leadership, protection, and continual attention to their well-being.^{viii}

Finally, the difference between God's shepherding and our human herding is exemplified in the expressions of Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei as he reflected on mass burials of schoolchildren and others in Sichuan after a major earthquake in 2008 in which the authorities made no attempt to identify the victims by name. This was the very opposite of what is meant when it is said that the Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name. Ai Weiwei writes:

“A name is the first and final marker of individual rights, one fixed part of the ever-changing human world. A name is the most basic characteristic of our human rights: no matter how poor or how rich, all living people have a name, and it is endowed with good wishes, the expectant blessings of kindness and virtue.”^{ix}

This same Good Shepherd never withholds his very being from *us* and if we but allow him to occasionally prod us, lead us, restore us – we will find our true freedom in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

ⁱ Quoted in “Sheep” in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 322.

ⁱⁱ Sheep need the shepherd to guide and care for them, and, in dire straits, to rescue them. There is nothing sentimental in this image or relationship: for the sheep it is a matter of survival, and for the shepherd a matter of economy. And sheep are just property, not pets to be cuddled, right? That's not us!

ⁱⁱⁱ ...in contrast to being a hired-hand or just a herder. I use the word “model” interchangeably with the word “good” when referring to the shepherd in this gospel because the original Greek word used here is not the normal Greek word for “good” implying the moral quality of goodness. Rather, the word used implies a good or noble or attractive example.

^{iv} Here's where we realize a bit more about ourselves as well. As Frederick Buechner states,

“Now if God [or God in Christ] is like a shepherd [then] there are more than just a few ways, needless to say, that people like you and me are like sheep. Being timid, greedy, [and] foolish... is part of it. [Also,] like sheep we get hungry, [but] hungry for more than just food. We get thirsty for more than just drink. Our souls get hungry and thirsty; in fact, it is often that sense of inner emptiness that makes us know we have souls in the first place. There is nothing that the world has to give us; there is nothing that we have to give to each other even, that ever quite fills them. But once in a while [we feel] that inner emptiness being filled... That is what [the Bible] means by saying that God is like a shepherd. It means that, like a shepherd, [God] feeds us. [God] feeds that part of us which is hungriest and most in need of feeding.” (Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), esp. pp. 177-180).

Of course, we go on anxiously wanting; we go on lacking and looking to fill these wants whether we believe in God or not. And these are wants not just for material things like a new apartment or a better paying job, but things like good health, things like happiness for our children, things like being understood and

appreciated, and things like relief from pain, and some measure of inner peace, not just for ourselves, but for the people we love and for many others. Buechner adds that we all go on wanting plenty our whole lives through. We long for what never seems to come. We pray for what never seems to be clearly given.

^v Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), p. 145

^{vi} We can best get a glimpse of ourselves when we look at what model of shepherding the good shepherd is really exercising. The model shepherd in John's gospel is contrasted with the hired hand. Now most of us are familiar with the experience of being cared for or attended to by a "hired hand" as opposed to the owner or proprietor of a business. Of course it is unfair to generalize or to apply one stereotypical description to all hired personnel—after all, that's most of us. And many such hired hands – employees at will - nonetheless excel in their pursuit of customer care and satisfaction (as it were) and in diligent, caring and compassionate work. Yet it must be admitted that owners have a vested interest that may not be shared by their employees. Jesus' listeners had known the care of many "hired hands," that is, leaders and others in authority who neither loved nor bore appropriate responsibility for the people. Six centuries earlier, the prophet Ezekiel testified against such leaders calling them false shepherds who cared nothing for the flock of Judah (Ch. 34). Ezekiel also prophesied a divine intervention whereby God would come among the people to shepherd them rightly.

^{vii} On an even more subtle yet all-pervasive level is the herd psychology that operates out of the heart of modern commerce. With each new fad and/or fashion that is introduced, merchandisers rely on the phenomenon of mob appeal spurred on by the endorsements of carefully chosen celebrity promoters. How many of us have bought some new gadget or wanted something simply because "everyone" that is, our social networks, the herd, was doing likewise – or believing naively that what we were wearing or driving somehow would make us unique like a lone wolf or an independent cougar say, and thus stand out from the rest of the crowd – only to find out the crowd also buying the same line and the same make or model of things? Modern prophets whether Nietzsche or Thoreau, Ivan Illich or Vance Packard commented on this ironic phenomenon of all us independent-minded folk acting like a herd. In each of these examples, herding is characterized by a nameless and impersonal coercion, by mob psychology more than independent decision, and by expediency rather than personal relationships. As well, the process of herding – albeit "customized" - puts everything and everyone in a pen while giving lip service to individual needs or varying circumstances.

^{viii} And so, as Henri Nouwen put it, "Spiritual leadership is the leadership of the Good Shepherd." See Bread for the Journey (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), (page) April 13. This can be said not only of good pastors, but good parenting, good teachers, good management, good coaches, good community and political leadership, and of course good friends – who exhibit neither the carelessness of the hired hand nor the manipulation or coercion of the herder. As Jesus says, good shepherds know their sheep, and their sheep know them (John.10:14). There must be a true mutuality between shepherd and sheep. Good leaders know their own, and their own know them. Between them is mutual trust, mutual openness, mutual care, and mutual love and/or respect. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd to show the right relationship that must exist between leaders and those entrusted to them. Without such relationship, leadership easily becomes oppressive. Our ancestors in the faith experienced this joy of freely following the Good Shepherd even in the midst of situations where larger powers of their day were forcing them to places they would rather not go.

^{ix} Ai Weiwei, quoted on exhibit panel of art works, "Remembrance" and "Sichuan Name List" in The Brooklyn Museum (2014).