

Easter 4B
Peace, Seattle
April 26, 2015
John 10:11-18

EYES ON THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Wherever our family happened to be last spring in our travels, lambs were being born, and sheep dotted the hillsides.

As a result, we had opportunities for some close encounters that we normally don't have.

- With our friend Claire we toured the Green Mountain Spinnery and saw raw wool being processed into gorgeous, fine yarns.¹
- At Plimoth Plantation we watched newborn lambs taking their first tentative steps.
- On Iona we walked among heritage breeds, petting their woolly backs and rubbing the lanolin into our hands.²
- Wherever we went, the sheep seemed as much a part of the natural landscape as the rocks themselves.
- Raising sheep, we learned, is serious business in Ireland; a sign we saw near the trails at Glendolough left no doubt: DOGS WORRYING THE SHEEP WILL BE SHOT!
No ifs, ands, or buts about it!

Sheep have a reputation in many quarters for being dumber than door nails. And maybe that's why we don't generally warm to the notion that WE—as followers of Jesus—are SHEEP.

But enter Barbara Brown Taylor, who offers a minority opinion:

Imagine my delight, she writes, when I discovered...that someone I know actually grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest... According to him sheep are not dumb at all.

It's cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. According to my friend, cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led.

You push cows, my friend says, but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first—namely their shepherd—who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.

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.

A good shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure, while the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue means food, or a two-note song means that it is time to go home...

[Sheep] know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd's voice, and it is the only one they will follow."³

In today's gospel the focus is less on the sheep and more on the shepherd—and not on shepherds in general, but ONE shepherd in particular—the GOOD SHEPHERD.

¹ <http://sabbatical.peacelutheranseattle.org/2014/03/16/green-mountain-spinery-putney-vermont/>

² <http://sabbatical.peacelutheranseattle.org/2014/04/19/petting-sheep-at-iona-by-naomi/>

³ BBB, "The Voice of the Shepherd."

Now we're awfully good, it seems to me, at telling stories so that the attention remains focused on US, the SHEEP: how we're faithful and unfaithful. How we stay safe and how we get into trouble. How we're baaaad sometimes and good other times.

But Jesus makes it hard for us to do that for very long this morning. He wants us, as thick skulled as we can sometimes be, to focus on the Shepherd rather than ourselves.

And who is this Good Shepherd? He is the one who lays down his life for his sheep. And just to make sure we get this, Jesus repeats it four times in eight verses.

We're missing the lead-in verse in today's reading, verse 10, but this is what it says:

THE THIEF COME COMES ONLY TO STEAL AND KILL AND DESTROY.
I CAME THAT [YOU] MAY HAVE LIFE, AND HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY.

Abundant life, in other words, is what is laid before us when the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. For you and me.

Now there's a bit about a WOLF in this passage. And a bit about the HIRED HAND, who, when push comes to shove, is more likely to run off and save his own skin than stay and face the danger.

But these characters, when all is said and done, says Jesus, are only bit players.

The one we need to keep our eyes on; the one whose voice we need to heed; the one in whose footsteps we need to follow, is the Good Shepherd. And when we do that, everything else falls into place.

**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil,
for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. (Ps 23)**

There is a singularity about this psalm and about this shepherd that people have recognized for three thousand years and counting. There is, at the last, the psalm says, only one shepherd who, when I'm on the brink of death, I can trust to lead me through.

In a sermon he wrote on this text as Hitler's wolves were poised to invade neighboring countries to the north and west, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

[This text] is not about shepherds and their work in general but about Jesus Christ alone. I am THE good shepherd—not A good shepherd, as if Jesus compared himself with other good shepherds and learned from them what a good shepherd should be. One can only experience what a good shepherd is from THE good shepherd to whom there is no comparison...

"Truly, [a] shepherd cares for his flock with all loyalty. But his shepherding duty never demands that he sacrifice himself for them." But Jesus calls himself the good shepherd because he dies for his sheep.⁴

Seven times in John's gospel Jesus defines himself with the words I AM... I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world; and today we hear one more: I AM the good shepherd.

⁴ [Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 15](#). *Theological Education Underground*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 547, 548.

With opposition to both the messenger and the message growing, Jesus uses this image to put another stamp on his own identity and purpose.

It's John's way of connecting the dots between the One whom he calls GOD'S WORD BECOME FLESH, and the MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE himself.

That any Master or Shepherd would willingly lay down his life for those beneath him makes no sense in a world preoccupied with hierarchy. So it's no real surprise that, immediately after our passage, John tells us,

[The Judeans] were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?" (Jn 10:19-21)

During his imprisonment at Berlin's Tegel prison after being implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer wrote a reflection piece to his closest friends, asking WHO WILL STAND FIRM in the growing crisis engulfing Europe.

"The huge masquerade of evil has thrown all ethical concepts into confusion," he writes.

"That evil should appear in the form of light, good deeds, historical necessity, social justice is absolutely bewildering... For the Christian who lives by the Bible, it is the very confirmation of the abysmal wickedness of evil...."

"Who stand firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God's question and call.⁵

At the same time as Bonhoeffer wrote these words from prison, 800 miles to the west and south, the people of the Vivarais Plateau around Le Chambon, France, were being led by the Good Shepherd to hide, shelter, protect, and rescue thousands of Jewish refugees—many of them children—at great risk to their own lives and in direct opposition to both the German and French Vichy authorities.

Meeting in small Bible study groups scattered throughout the rural parish with leaders trained by their pastors, the people of these Protestant congregations heard in the Scriptures the voice of the Good Shepherd ringing above the noise of war and above their own doubts and misgivings.

That voice called them to follow him, to take the risk, to love the stranger, to become places of refuge.

The story of the people of Le Chambon and the surrounding communities is a powerful one...you've heard me tell it before. And next week a special guest Professor Patrick Henry will be here with us during our education hour and again after worship to speak and share a film about this remarkable story. I hope you will come.

While that War finally ended, it wasn't long before another war festered and finally boiled over in another corner of the world. And so it has gone; and so it goes.

Against this backdrop of violence and dread, Christ calls us once more to train our ears on his promise: **I LAY DOWN MY LIFE IN ORDER TO TAKE IT UP AGAIN.**

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8. Letters and Papers from Prison. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 39, 40.

This is the promise of the Good Shepherd who is also the Resurrection and the Life.

In his last recorded words as he faced his executioners 70 years ago this month, Bonhoeffer said:
THIS IS THE END – FOR ME THE BEGINNING OF LIFE.

Whatever the future may hold for us, individually or collectively, they all begin here at this Table, as we receive Christ, and, following his lead, become his body in and for the world.

Let us pray:

Good Shepherd, lead us through the dark valleys of death, and into the glorious light of your resurrection. Grant us joy as we follow you with all boldness and confidence, knowing that our lives are forever in your hands. Amen.