

John 10: 11-18 Flocks and folds

Sheep and shepherds, seeds and sowers, vines, vineyards and vintars. These are metaphors which Jesus used to tell his listeners the lessons he wished them to hear and understand about God and God's reign. These are images which were very familiar to those who gathered to hear him teach. They are based in the reality of an agricultural society whose living depended upon these things. In terms of everyday life, they are no longer familiar to us. We do not have much first hand experience of these things especially as something vital to our survival. But we have heard these metaphors as Bible stories, often from a very young age so we have attached meanings to the terms especially as they apply to Jesus and his teaching ministry then and now. Within the gospel of John these same metaphors were used by Jesus about himself. We are still in the Easter season, the resurrection has been revealed to the disciples. They are awaiting the coming of the Spirit which will happen at Pentecost. In this time of waiting they probably began to reflect on those things which he had told them as they wandered the county side with him. The lectionary today begins our reflections on the meaning of this resurrection for those who believe. The goal is to assist us as we, like those first disciples, seek to understand what happened and is happening to us as we encounter the risen Christ, to understand who is this person Jesus Christ and what who he is means for those who believe what he said of himself. The images of himself which Jesus taught before his death are used as tools for this understanding. Although anyone seeing the pictures which we usually entitle the Good Shepherd will identify the shepherd as Jesus, more commonly we identify Christ through the symbol of the cross or crucifix or an infant lying in a manger. But some of the earliest images of Jesus found in churches and tombs were not portrayals of the nativity scene or the crucifixion. Rather they picture Jesus as the gentle shepherd. One of the earliest found shows a young Jesus in a short white tunic with a lamb draped over his shoulders. Jesus taught that he was the shepherd and those who believed were his flock. In today's reading we have the job description for the model shepherd. Through this text we can explore what it means to understand the risen Christ as our shepherd as well as what kind of flock we are to be. I imagine that for most of us our encounters with sheep may be limited to those at a county fair or perhaps through their appearances in some movie or television dramatization. Other than the fact that like the children's books tell us they say "Baaaa" and they can be shorn for the wool they produce--we really don't know what their characteristics are. Sheep played an entirely different role in the daily life of those to whom Jesus spoke. Sheep provided nourishment in the form of milk, cheese and meat. Their coats provided clothing. And even though not everyone made their living from them, everyone had everyday experiences with sheep and shepherds as the flocks wandered the area. These contributions to their way of life are important factors for this image and what Jesus said about shepherding and sheep. But to his audience Jesus is also making another claim. Sheep were also an integral part of their religious life and rituals. Each year to commemorate the story of Moses and the flight from Egypt they recall that they are to take a lamb for each family and prepare the Passover meal. As we have read this morning the idea of God as the shepherd guiding Israel was a part of their long held tradition of God and how God acts in relationship with Israel. Now Jesus is not only declaring how a good shepherd will act and what a good shepherd will do--he is telling them and us that he is that good shepherd. This

seems obvious to us, but was probably very startling to those who first heard it. Claiming to be the Good Shepherd was a claim to be God. The passage for today begins first with a description of who does not make a good shepherd--the hired hand. The hired hand, Jesus tells us, thinks only of himself and not the sheep in his care. When danger threatens the sheep, the hired hand will run away. When I think about this portion of the text it reminds me of all the Westerns I watched with my father. There were always bandits, wolves and rustlers who threatened the herds. It was dangerous work to protect them. This was also true in Jesus' time. Shepherds were called upon to protect their flocks. Today, there are many things in the world which serve to scatter and distract us, to take us places where we should not go. We too need the Good Shepherd for our protection. Jesus tells his listeners that in contrast to the hired hand the good shepherd intervenes for the protection of his flock, risking himself. In fact, according to Jesus the good shepherd will go so far as to lay down his life for the sheep. First verse 11 puts this as a type of general statement, even after claiming himself as the good shepherd. Verse 15 makes this same statement in more specific terms: "And I lay down my life for the sheep." This is no longer presented as a possibility but as a reality of what Jesus will do. This entire chapter is a continuation of a dispute Jesus had with the Pharisees. Jesus had healed a blind man on the Sabbath and the Pharisees sought to use this against Jesus. When they could not get the man with the restored sight to testify against Jesus, they drove him out of his village. Jesus finds the formerly blind man and talks with him. The healed man then worships him. Jesus then says that the blind man now sees and the Pharisees are blind. This becomes the starting point for this discourse on sheep, shepherds and those who would harm the sheep. Today's passage is the second of these descriptions because those who heard him did not understand what he said in the first. That passage ends with verse 10: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." In many ways, that is the true beginning of today's passage. Jesus came to give life to those who belong to God. In verse 18 after Jesus has declared that his way of caring for the sheep of his pasture is to gather them and protect them Jesus gives the extent to which he will go: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father." As Easter people, we understand this as a reference to the crucifixion and the resurrection. Also as Easter people, we have an understanding about an earlier verse in this passage, verse 14: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." This statement is about the identity of the sheep. The sheep are claimed by the shepherd, but it is a two-fold claiming--the sheep also claim the shepherd. The sheep know who their shepherd is. This is an intimate knowing--just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. This knowing is founded on the love which comes from the Father through Jesus to those sheep. The characteristic given for the sheep of knowing their shepherd comes through the fact they know his voice. This is a fascinating reality of this text which is often overlooked although it is clearly stated. It is key that the sheep are said to recognize the shepherd's voice. Embedded in this statement is a basic fact recognized and studied in the field of speech communication: listening. Prior to recognizing and responding to a sound, one must listen. If the link between Jesus and his flock is mediated by recognition of the Master's voice, what does that mean for us and our response? In a culture which is heavily focused on words and speaking, the emphasis on listening as a prior condition and state can be overlooked. Yet,

listening has a rich spiritual and personal biblical history in the area of spiritual formation and discernment of God's will. And it is interesting to note that in the Hebrew the word we usually read as hear actually can just as easily be translated as listen. So when we encounter "Hear the word of the Lord", we are actually being told LISTEN to the word of God. Listen and respond to what you have heard. Certainly the ability to recognize the shepherd's voice at all is what preaching the Gospel is about. We use our voice to bring the shepherd's voice which calls us to life, salvation, new hope and safety to those who need to hear it. The church, from the earliest days, has recognized that this must be spoken repeatedly both to all who recognize it and to those who are unfamiliar with it. In John's gospel Jesus is the revealer, the One who comes to make the invisible God visible and the unapproachable God accessible. Jesus comes to reveal that God loves the whole world, no exceptions. We are very familiar with the words of John 3:16, but here in this passage we have another reminder of just how abundant is God's love. This verse is often overlooked when considering the flock of the Good Shepherd. Verse 16: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." In other words, Jesus didn't just come for the original group of disciples. He came also for us, and we are now invited to hear and believe this message of grace and acceptance. We are also invited to share it with each other and all those we meet. This is a meaning that we willingly adopt. But Jesus doesn't describe exactly just who those other sheep are. This phrase leaves the door open to the reader/hearers of the Gospel. It also serves to warn against any kind of exclusive claim on the Good Shepherd Jesus. Deciding who is in and who is out is really, this suggests, not the business of the sheep and is a mystery to them. We sheep folk are told only to cleave to Jesus, to love, and to testify, as Jesus makes clear in his teachings. I think we sometimes have problems with accepting this aspect of the work of Jesus. We are inclined to think only those of us in this fold hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. It seems to me that Jesus is telling us that the work is not yet done. There are still more sheep he needs to reach, sheep that are not in the fold as we recognize it. God is still at work among humanity. God continues to call people from all walks of life, from every nation on earth and from each and every generation across history. If that were not true, we would not have received the gift of faith. God is at work in our midst and uses us to extend the invitation to abundant life offered through the Good Shepherd to include others in this fold. God's one fold according to this statement of Jesus has an expansiveness whose limits we cannot imagine. God isn't done yet. This image is that Jesus is still calling, God is still searching. In time there we will all be one flock under one shepherd but the members of the one flock may very well be some we would not have expected to be there. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Thanks be to God.