

Shepherds and Voices

The passage for today from John's gospel is such a familiar text, the image presented is one of our most beloved where Jesus draws on that imagery established from the Hebrew Scripture. This image is of God as the kind of shepherd which only God can be; for only God is the true shepherd of God's people, this is the one who as Psalm 23 describes is the one who leads them and provides for them always. Psalm 23 was also part of the lectionary for today, but those verses and images are so familiar that no re-printing is needed to call them to mind—the only less familiar aspect of that psalm might be our understanding of the intensity of the final portion of the psalm which translated usually says “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”. In the Hebrew, a better translation for the word “follow” would be “to pursue or chase after”. If you consider the whole narrative we that we have received of God's history with humankind, that latter is a more accurate description of what has occurred and, in fact is still occurring in God's pursuit of relationship with us. God's goodness and mercy is pursuing us, trying very hard to establish God's own vision and relationships with us and among us through the teachings and revelations found in our scriptures about God's ways for our living together and in relationship with God. Within the John 10 extended passage and metaphor in which John narrates Jesus uses this traditional image of God as shepherd as one of the identity “I am” statements which establishes his divinity. God as Israel's shepherd was a familiar image to his audience. Within this gospel passage there are also two distinctive aspects which define Jesus' shepherding practice and which are given particular emphasis for Jesus' view of what it means to be a shepherd. These two distinctive aspects somewhat complicate the metaphor—making it a somewhat mixed image but both relate to Jesus' intimate knowledge of sheep and shepherding. In the first aspect raised, it is clear that Jesus has an intimate knowledge of his sheep, those he has claimed for his flock. He makes clear he knows them by name and his sheep are those who recognize his voice. Jesus speaks not of head knowledge, but of intimate, relational knowledge between shepherd and sheep. The other distinctive emphasis found in this passage is Jesus' stated willingness, as the good shepherd, even to lay down his life for his sheep. These are not words of self-sacrifice, but of self-giving and radical commitment: “No one takes (my life) 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.” The good shepherd protects the sheep from danger, whatever the cost, calling to mind Psalm 23's affirmation of the shepherd's accompaniment in the midst of dark valleys and the presence of enemies: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” The Hebrew Scripture and John 10 together give the image of God's in Christ's deep solidarity with the flock, whatever the circumstances. Today's passage opens with that clear statement of absolute clarity: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” This image, coming as it does just four Sundays into the Easter Season is especially vivid. There are no qualifiers. There is no equivocation about what the good shepherd will do when the sheep entrusted to his care are endangered. The passage goes on to describe and contrast another situation; that of the hired hand. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep when danger comes, will run away; will leave the sheep to be scattered and harmed. In the metaphor the danger comes in the form of a wolf, those would have been the most likely predator for flocks

in the region. Sometimes when dealing with these metaphors, it is hard to assign roles to all of the characters. It is clear who Jesus is. Jesus tells us that clearly. What is not so clear is how do we know and recognize those in our lives who functions as the hired hands or the predators, the wolf in the metaphor; those who would harm or who will not protect from harm? Within this metaphor, Jesus says that his sheep know him; that they know his voice. This second portion of Jesus' statement seems to not be as firm an assertion for if all of his sheep recognized his voice, then what role would the "hired hand have?" If the sheep of Jesus' flock know his voice, why would they then follow "the hired hand"? How do those of the flock tell the difference between words which are spoken in the voice of the shepherd and those spoken in the voice of the "hired hand" who does not love? Sometimes I wonder if some of his sheep have stopped listening for his voice; or if his voice has been drowned out by the noise of other voices which have grown so loud in the world around us. The hired hands—those false shepherds seem to be very loud and present in our time because there are so many voices shouting out words which do not proclaim the message of love which Jesus proclaimed even though they say they bear his name. Any oversight of a flock by a "hired hand" or shepherd who does not truly care for the sheep...all the people whom God loves...cannot be providing the security which their words promise. The gospel narrative of John 10 invites us to reflect on the difference between the deeply relational concept of shepherding according to the self-described image of Jesus compared to that of the transactional concept of shepherd for hire. In our world there are many dangers which tempt us to leave the teachings we have been given, these are perhaps the things which could be seen as a "wolf" in the metaphor. Sometimes, metaphors just need to remain limited and not able to expand. But within this metaphor it seems that the truth of how well and intimately the good shepherd knows his sheep holds more profoundly true than the corresponding part that the sheep know their shepherd. The image of the good shepherd tending to one beloved flock is so very powerful. The flock is so beloved that the shepherd will stop at nothing to keep them gathered and safe, calls forth a longing within us to belong to that flock; to be among that protected group: safe and at rest, deeply at peace. If we follow the voice of the good shepherd, then we are following the teaching of Jesus...those teachings calling us to love and care for one another...we will be committed to working for justice, inclusion, into being the one beloved flock...yet so often we find ourselves building barriers, not bridges...finding things to separate not draw together...so to whose voice are we listening? Verse 16 of this chapter reads: "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." Somehow we don't seem to be able to imagine one human race...one flock...we find so many ways to see each other differently despite being told that we are all made in God's image. Throughout this passage the theme repeats itself over and over; five times in nine verses that the goodness of the true shepherd comes at a cost. It comes at a cost because the good shepherd cares...loves. The good shepherd not only knows his sheep but loves them and this love is to be mutual, they are to know him and know his voice and listen to it. As we consider the gift that we have been given...the gift of a good shepherd who did indeed lay down his life for us and had the power to take it up again...we should take to heart what the passage from 1st John 3: 16-18 tells us about our Good shepherd: We know love by this: that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet

refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” The very practical living out of the final commandment that Jesus gave his disciples to love one another as he loved them...is to create communities of love and caring which would bring God’s reign near...is to live a one belonging in the flock and following the leading of the good shepherd. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.