

Easter 4 Sunday, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

12th May, 2019

Revelation 7:9-17 NRSV / John 10:22-30 NIV

So when you think of caring for sheep, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

Well, what do we think of when caring for any animal we are responsible for?

Certainly we would want to make sure we have the right food to feed them,
and that they have access to adequate clean water.

Certainly for animals like sheep that are not capable of providing their own
protection,

we would need to make sure they have a secure shelter during the night,
to protect them from predators and danger.

But most importantly, they need tended.

Like a lot of domesticated animals,
sheep are particularly prone to trouble if they're not looked after well.

Ever since humans began breeding sheep for their own needs,
they no longer prosper well without the care of a shepherd.

Where once wild sheep did survive in much smaller flocks,
being leaner and shedding their fleece each year,
domesticated sheep have been bred to be larger, with more permanent wool,
that makes them prone to parasites and predators
without the proper care.

Sheep tend to flock together in a tight group when faced with predators,
which is what makes shepherding dog breeds so effective.

They play on the natural instincts of sheep
because they are viewed as a predator.

But without guidance or shepherding, sheep tend to wander,
and can become lost, or tangled in briars and bushes.

The Bible is full of imagery of sheep and shepherds,

as they were central figures in that culture, both then and today.

Our image this morning is a Palestinian shepherd
outside of modern day Bethlehem.

But to understand the meaning that imagery had to those in Jesus' audience,
it's important to examine what meanings the shepherd metaphor had
for the ancient Israelites.

SLIDE

Certainly Psalm 23 very eloquently portrays God the Father
as the ultimate benevolent shepherd.

With God we lie in green pastures and are led by still waters,
which is important because sheep
much prefer clear still water to running streams.

However, it's also important to recognize that bad shepherds
are also another important metaphor in Jewish theology.

SLIDE

Ezekiel 24 relays the way bad shepherds behave.

“Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves!

Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool

and slaughter the choice animals,

but you do not take care of the flock.

You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick

or bound up the injured.

SLIDE

You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.

You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

So they were scattered because there was no shepherd,

and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.

My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.”

So when we enter this conversation between Jesus and the men in the Temple,

they have this history of viewing shepherds from both good and bad lights.

We have the contrast of the promise in God

of the green pastures of David's psalm

with the stark rebuke from Ezekiel to the Jews in exile in Babylon,

many of whom were the bad sheep who led Judea astray

and away from God and God's justice.

The setting for the story in Ezekiel is after Judea

has been conquered by the Babylonians

and the first group of Jews is led into exile in Babylon.

We often have this conception that all the Jews were sent into exile

but that is not the reality.

When these exiles happened in the ancient world,
it was generally those who had influence and wealth
who were taken captive.

They were the ones who had wealth and could pay tribute,
as well as those who typically made up the ruling class
and exerted power in a culture.

The first group sent to Babylon included the court of King Jeconiah
and the rest of the aristocracy.

So when Ezekiel is relaying God's pronouncement on the "bad shepherds"
for leading his sheep astray and letting them be scattered about everywhere,
they would know exactly who he is referring to, themselves.

SLIDE

Jesus uses this metaphor to draw the reverse contrast
between sheep that listen to the good shepherd,
and those who refuse and follow the shepherds that lead them astray.

In contrast to the wicked shepherds of Ezekiel 34,
John portrays Jesus as the good Shepherd,
the authentic bearer of God's caring authority.

When Jesus says to his critics, "You do not belong to my sheep,"
he implies that they are wicked.

They cannot see the truth of his testimony
because they follow wicked shepherds, wicked leaders.

Jesus says that the sheep of his fold "hear his voice" and "follow him."

It is this unity of hearing and doing that binds the sheep of Jesus' fold to him.

In that unity, the disciples' relationship to Jesus is similar
to Jesus' relationship to the Father.

This sense of shared purpose is further supported
when Jesus states that he and the Father are one.

Now we would be tempted to see this as confirmation
of the concept of the Trinity or the Incarnation,
that Jesus is God in human form.

However, the Greek word used doesn't really convey this
meaning.

It conveys a unity of purpose.

But most importantly it relates belonging to a community,
a flock of followers that cannot be snatched from Christ's hands
anymore than they can be snatched from God's hands.
Just as Easter is proof for Christians that Jesus is ultimately in the hands of God,
not in the hands of the emperor or in the hands of death,
so in our celebration we claim that we are in Jesus' hands,
not in the hands of the powers of this world.

What might it mean for us to live out of that confidence and trust,
and so become the hands of Christ in the world?

SLIDE

Whom are we willing to hold on to, as we are in the hands of Christ? Whom are we to hold?

Today's gospel story and reading from Revelation

really reinforce this concept of being cared for by the good shepherd,
of being part of a flock, of being held in the grasp of Jesus and God.

But it also relays the reality of bad shepherds, those who lead sheep astray,
those who put their own interests above what's best for the welfare of the flock.

Sound familiar at all?

The question we face is two-fold:

how do we counter those bad shepherds in our world, here and now,
and how do we reach out to bring the sheep lost in the wilderness
into the safety and comfort of our fold? How do we find and welcome the lost?

Both questions have the same answer.

We become Christ's hands in this world.

We reach out to make a difference in people's lives.

Like the good shepherd,

we lead people to greener pastures beside calm waters.

We provide a safe space where they can feel comfortable to be themselves,
whatever that may be, and to share their joy, their pain, their anger,
their grief, whatever troubles them and keeps them isolated and alone.

We step out in our community and see what needs the lost sheep have,
and work to meet those needs.

Drawing on the example of Ezekiel,

we speak out to counter and drown out the voices of the bad shepherds,
who say it's okay to steal their curds and wool for themselves,
who say it's acceptable not to heal the sick sheep
or bind their wounds,
that it's okay to let them wander and become lost,
that it's all the sheep's own fault anyway.

We have field work to do, our job is never done.

Our church can be that safe place where people come to find respite
from the troubles they face in the wilderness.

We can be God's shepherds in our community,
the hands of Christ at work in this world, at this time.

But it takes commitment, and effort.

Signing up to be a follower of Christ has its cost;
those stain-free white robes in Revelation come at a price,
they often come with blood, sweat, and tears.

But the end result is well worth it, isn't it?

I hope and pray that we can work together to find those sheep
in need of the comfort and security of our pasture and still waters,
that we can work to ease the burden of those struggling sheep all around us,
and be the hands of Christ we are called to be. Amen.