

I am getting tired of talking about sheep. Every fourth Sunday in Eastertide we venture into the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John. In year A, our current year, we get *I am the gate for the sheep*. In Year B, we get *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*. In Year C we get *My sheep hear my voice; no one will snatch them out of my hand*. Always the 10th chapter. Always the fourth Sunday. Different verses. But ...always shepherds and sheep.

All this emphasis upon shepherds and sheep gets me to ransacking my memory for sheep stories. And I have some. We lived just down the road from a woman who raised 50 sheep on twenty-six acres in the 90s and at the same time we had about 5 sheep on our place, so I have some stories. And then, decades earlier, working in the Forest Service in the Randle District of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in the State of Washington one year, I managed to come away with some other stories of sheep. From our camp we looked down on about 1800 of them and the shepherders portable cabin about a mile away in a green meadow.

So why am I getting tired of talking about sheep...? Well, the simple fact is, that, in all of these stories, it turns out that WE are the sheep. That's the central problem about shepherds and their sheep in the Bible. Almost always, we are the sheep. O, there are lambs, pure and spotless. But when it comes to sheep, herds of sheep, wandering sheep, dumb sheep, short-sighted sheep possessed of no common sense, sheep caught in thickets, sheep paralyzed by fear at the sight of dogs or wolves or coyotes or lions -- when it comes to these practical sides of the genus - species *ovis aries*, dear friends, WE ARE THE SHEEP!

The prophet Isaiah says so eloquently *All we like sheep have gone astray/ We have turned each one to his own way/ And the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all*. WE ARE THE SHEEP.

So let's take one of these facets, these items of behavior from sheep life. Let us this morning, take the paralysis of fear at the sight of the enemy, the coyote, the wolf, the lion. There is a reason why Jesus says he is the *gate for the sheep*. In the ancient world and even now in many parts of the world, sheep are housed over night in sheep folds. Often they are circular and they are built with available materials. But then there is the doorway, often completely open. If there is no door, when

sheep are driven into the fold in the waning light of another day of grazing just past, the shepherd, when they are safely in, will physically lie down in the open space of the gate. The Shepherd will literally become the gate, offering his prone body across the open space as a barrier to predators who arrive looking for food.

The shepherd IS the gate. If there are multiple shepherds and multiple herds, come sunrise, the shepherds will call their sheep and the sheep, hearing the familiar voice of their shepherd, will respond. And so one can imagine a lion or a wolf at the opening in the black of night and the shepherd aroused by the murmuring of his sheep. The shepherd rises up to encounter the foe while in the back the sheep huddle as they often do, paralyzed by fear. In an open field, with no one or a trained sheep dog around for protection, many sheep will die as the dog pack or coyotes or wolves terrorize the flock. Some will be killed outright, but many others will simply die of heart attacks in the paralysis of fear.

Are we paralyzed by fear? Many who hear this talk of shepherds and of sheep would be quick to move away from any thought that they are sheep. Dependent sheep. Hapless sheep. This is against the American grain of hearty and bold independence. Self-made men and women. Independent. Resourceful. Resilient. But are we paralyzed by fear?

Martin Niemöller 1892-1984 was a German Lutheran minister and at the beginning of the reign of Adolf Hitler in Germany he was a man with anti-Semitic views. The permanent exhibit in the Holocaust Museum of the United States points out that Niemöller in fact was a Nazi sympathizer. A sheep. Was he paralyzed by fear? If he was, all that soon changed. Niemöller became one of the earliest pastors to speak out against Hitler and his regime. And he paid for it: From 1937 to 1945 Niemöller spent years suffering in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps. At the Holocaust Museum, Niemöller's famous poem is on display. It is a challenge to all of us who are sheep, likely to be paralyzed by fear in political and social climates dominated by fear and group-think.

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

This poem was written to the German nation and especially to its pastors. The point was that Germans—and in particular the leaders of the Protestant churches—had been complicit through their silence in the Nazi imprisonment, persecution, and murder of millions of people.

How far are we going to take the sheep image. To be sure, we need a shepherd. Someone to guide us, someone to find us in the midst of the ravines and brambles of life, those narrow and impossible places that we seem to be able to find. But then, being slung across the shoulders of the shepherd, being led by the still waters, having our souls and spirits restored. Then, perhaps we should not be so content to be sheep. Maybe it is a little bit too convenient for us *always* to be proclaiming that we are sheep when God asks us to be bold, sheep when God asks us to be principled, bleating sheep when God asks us to shoulder our own cross and intentionally not blindly follow.

After all, there are other understandings of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And one of them is suffering.

Our second reading this morning from Peter, the concluding sentence is *For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.* But notice the suffering talk that precedes it. *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness....* Righteousness. A sense of justice and compassion for others that does not shrink from speaking out. Not a selfish sense of preserving our own skin. No, rather a sense of following and returning to a shepherd who may ask us to suffer. *Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out...because I was not a Jew.* Are we willing to speak out, to speak out of the context of Jesus' teachings and examples that show us how to think and what to do? Niemöller spent seven years in Nazi prisons. And now today listen as Peter writes his fellow Christians. He says *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.* Here is an example of suffering that we would like to dismiss....

Who speaks for the African Americans in our society? Who speaks out in solidarity with women when abusive terms and actions are tolerated? Who speaks out for those with disabilities in our society when they are overlooked or dismissed? Do we have a responsibility to care for other people because the shepherd cares for us... or is Jesus just for church? Does a rising tide of compassion and justice for all lift all boats in our society or just lift all yachts? How many black

friends do any of us have? What about those treaties with Native Americans that have been overlooked and violated? Is that just ancient history? What about all those refugees? We buy coffee from Haiti, but how much more do we know and how much more could we do when it comes to Haiti?

The Christians who followed Jesus in those early years and in the two centuries and more that followed were people subject to persecution. So they must have spoken up and spoken out. The implication of Peter's letter in our second lesson this morning is that they went astray when they were not suffering; presumably when they were fearful or content or inactive and not speaking up and living out their faith.

So perhaps we have a shepherd to save us from being abject sheep. Docile sheep. Mindless sheep. Perhaps we have the shepherd of still waters and green pastures who restores our souls so that we-- like Jesus-- can practice a radical sense of compassion.

Our society needs people who can stand in the breach and remember the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger in the land and who are willing to endure suffering for the sake of righteousness. That is not an easy task to contemplate, yet if we are willing to love, perhaps we too will be numbered among those who hear the voice of the Shepherd standing at the gate of the sheep fold.

For that is where the Shepherd stands each and every morning. The Good Shepherd stands at the gate and asks his sheep, sheltered and protected during the long night, to now be willing to come forth. To come forth into a dangerous world... and follow.

In the name of G-d, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.