

Message for April 25, 2021

Good Shepherd Sunday

John 10:11-18 and 1 John 3:16-24

This is the day that we often call Good Shepherd Sunday. Because it is the day that Jesus refers to himself in that way. When he does this, he is referring back to the words of Ezekiel, specifically chapter 34, in which God Promises to be the Peoples' Shepherd.

For thus says Our Sovereign: I myself will search for my sheep; I will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when their flocks are scattered in every direction, so I will search for my sheep and rescue them, no matter where they scattered on that day of full clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the countries and bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by its streams and wherever there is a settlement. I will feed them on good pasture land, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing ground. I myself will tend my flock and have it lie down, thus says Sovereign YHWH. I will seek out the lost, I will return the strayed, I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. I will watch over the fat and the sleek. I will be a true shepherd to them. (Ezekiel 34.11-16, The Inclusive Bible)

Jesus is highlighting his devotion to the people. His commitment. As my colleague Elaine Bidgood-Sweet notes, Jesus loves the sheep and will sacrifice for them.¹ Being only a month out of Easter, we know just how significant a sacrifice that is.

Now, I don't know about you, but sometimes I do feel like a sheep. Particularly this one: [Sheep is freed from trench by human, immediately gets itself stuck again](#)

This is me riding the COVID rollercoaster of the past year. Self isolating, physically distancing, mentally and emotionally hiding, until the shepherd comes along and pulls me out of the hole, until I get stuck again. This also feels like an apt metaphor for our

¹ Gathering Lent/Easter 2021, page 22. Used with permission.

pandemic restrictions and response. We are locked down, we are stuck at home, in a ditch. Then we are free! Then we are stuck again. And who knows how many more times we will do this?

It is anxiety producing, nerve wracking, putting us on edge. And that doesn't always bring out our best behaviour. We stop giving each other the benefit of the doubt. We stop offering one another grace. We start name calling - uninformed, ignorant, "sheeple." It doesn't seem to matter which "side" you are on. No one is immune to hearing our hurling such accusations. We are perhaps behaving like the hired hand, focused on our own self interests and not the good of the flock. Perhaps we are behaving a little like sheep, flocking together with those who think and act the same as "us." But that's not enough, Jesus tells us that there are others that belong, that there will be one flock and one shepherd. All inclusive. What if we leaned into the "sheeple" label. Not that I think following public health orders is unthinking or uncritically accepting what is before us. Rather, it shows an amount of humility, knowing that there are others who have done this work, and dedicated themselves to understanding the science and are giving advice that is based on solid research. Not only that, it's for the health, safety, wellbeing of as many people as possible, the entire flock.

In her article for Disrupt Worship, Kayla Sadowy argues that we should be *more like* sheep here, particularly in their flocking behaviour. She makes the connection between their flocking and our social structure -

Sheep need other sheep (more than a shepherd) to feel safe because it establishes connection, relationship, and bonding. Hence, the flocking tendencies.

Wandering away from the flock causes anxiety enough, but should a sheep become startled or threatened, it will flee back to the flock, often to the center.

After all, stray sheep and those on the perimeter of the flock are more susceptible to predators such as wolves. These two points highlight the need for community and the necessary pliability of social structure within the community. Continually existing on the outer edges of a community nurtures an ongoing sense of threat and susceptibility to real danger. When that happens, or better yet, before it ever

reaches the point of chronic stress or a near-encounter with a wolf, sheep on the periphery need to be centered. This means the sheep who are acclimated to the center of the flock need to remove themselves before an endangered sheep comes pleading for its life. Those sheep so familiar with being centered can serve the flock well by volunteering to place their bodies in harm's way, long before a threat is real.²

I love this imagery and metaphor that she shares. This is also why we are doing church the way we have been this year. Why we stay home, why we mask, why we are getting vaccinated as we can, why we are careful and cautious. Because we do not want anyone to be left behind. We want to keep everyone safe.

This is also why we are Public Intentional and Explicit about our welcome of LGBTQ2S+ folks. This is why we begin our worship with a Land Acknowledgement. This is why we say Black Lives Matter. This is why we must speak up and act against racism and misogyny, wherever we find it. These are small actions, yes, but they are a start. As people who have been centered for so long, we should have the energy and the resources, to center others. To see who has been pushed to the margins and now needs to be drawn in, kept safe, have us make space for them. We are taking our example from the Good Shepherd, from our Scripture. We hear it in our Epistle today:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ died for us. And we, too, ought to lay down our lives for our sisters and brothers. If you have more than enough material possessions and see your neighbors in need yet close your hearts to them, how can the love of God be living in you? My children, our love must not be simply words or mere talk—it must be true love, which shows itself in action and truth. This, then, is how we'll know we belong to the truth; this is how we'll be confident in God's presence.

(1 John 3.16-19 The Inclusive Bible)

² <https://www.disruptworshipproject.com/sheep-as-model-for-beloved-community-easter-4b/>

This is one of those passages where we don't have to go searching for the meaning. We don't have to dig deep into the history or language. We only need to dig deep within ourselves. We know that we cannot love God and ignore those in need. Making space, centering those on the edges, tending to one another is necessary. This isn't a theoretical exercise for this hour every Sunday, it is what we are called to do everyday. To be active, to love, to embody Christ. When we live out our love, we will be in relationship with the holy. It won't be without struggle, or the worry that we are doing the right thing, but we have guidance for that - The Good Shepherd, the Good News, the Gospel.

It is what will get us out of the ditches and into dancing.

Perhaps moving toward something more like this: [I wanna dance with somebody, some baa baa baa body who loves me...](#)