

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

May 3, 2009
4th Sunday of Easter
John 10:11-18

Enfolded by Love

Growing up in south central Montana, I thought I had seen a lot of sheep over the years. In the foothills of the Beartooth Mountains we'd see flocks of sheep dotting the landscape as we made our way up into the various canyons of those rugged mountains. Even out on the plains there would be large flocks interspersed between the cattle herds. It wasn't until I spent some time last fall in Scotland and Northern Ireland though that I realized I hadn't seen so many sheep before. Perhaps it's the vivid verdant landscape that makes the white sheep stand out more against the various shades of green. Or maybe it's the steep hillsides on which the sheep graze that allows more of them to be seen in a glance. The ample precipitation in these countries certainly contributes to the number of sheep that can be sustained in a given plot of land since the grasses keep growing and growing, seemingly year-round. Actually, the truth be told, there simply are more sheep to be seen over there—lots more! After doing a little research I found that according to the United Kingdom's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the highest concentrations of sheep in the United Kingdom are in the North Antrim coastal area of Northern Ireland, where we lived for 3 months—more than 240 sheep per square kilometer! That's a lot of sheep. In Northern Ireland which is about the size of the state of Connecticut there are a little over 2 million sheep. The human population is about 1.6 million. So unless one is confined to the inner city of Belfast, to spend time in Northern Ireland is to spend time with sheep.

An old tradition in the Christian church is to observe today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, as Good Shepherd Sunday. The Bible—both the Old and New Testaments—is filled with references to sheep and shepherds. More often than not, God or Jesus are compared to a shepherd and the people of God are compared to the sheep themselves. Up until these postmodern times and the modern times that preceded them, the images of sheep and shepherds were meaningful and relevant for the readers and hearers of the Bible. And while this being Montana, there are probably a few of you here today with firsthand experience and knowledge of such, most of us have little more to go on than what we've heard or learned over the years. So while this imagery may be meaningful to a certain degree, it may not be as thoroughgoingly so as it was for earlier generations. And yet, one of the most well known and well loved passages in all of the Bible is the 23rd Psalm which we sang with Russell this morning. It evokes the care and love that God provides us throughout our lives as well as into eternity through the imagery of a good and loving shepherd.

As I said, much of our knowledge about shepherds and sheep is based on what we've heard and learned. In my study this week I learned something new about sheep. Or perhaps another way to say it is that I learned that something I thought I knew about sheep may not be as true as I thought it was. Have you ever heard about how dumb sheep are? Yeah. Me too. Well it turns out that this piece of information largely comes from those in the agricultural community who raise cattle. Or at least they are the ones who have perpetuated this understanding, or should I say misunderstanding, of sheep. Now I'll be happy to be corrected on any of this since this is surely outside my direct experience. This

is what I learned. When cattle are moved from pasture to pasture they are prodded from behind. Cattle drives are conducted from behind. The cowboys and the cowdogs push, prod and herd the cattle along the way from here to there. And if everyone does their part, the herd gets moved to the new pasture successfully. Well it doesn't work that way with sheep. Sheep have to be led from the front. If a shepherd tries to move a flock from behind them, no progress will be made. All of the sheep will be bewildered looking around for who to follow, hence the conclusion that we reach that they're dumb. But the shepherd knows that if he leads the way, the sheep will follow, listening for the familiar sound of the shepherd's voice. That's not to say that there's still not a role for the sheepdogs who keep the sheep moving, pushed and focused toward the correct leader.

As I was reading about this, I was reminded of one of the experiences we had with sheep in Northern Ireland. One glorious fall afternoon we were driving around the area enjoying the beautiful countryside in the area in which we were living. As we were driving down this very narrow road through a forested section, we could see a fork in the road ahead of us. The main route was to take the fork to the right. Well as we approached the fork we could see a big flock of sheep running toward us from the left fork. There must have been 75 or 80 of them. There were no people or dogs in sight. They were running as if their lives depended on it down the narrow road between the hedgerows on either side. As we reached the fork at about the same time as these agitated sheep, we drove to the right. I thought the sheep would continue up the road behind us and away from us. Instead, all of a sudden we found that they made a sharp almost U-turn and started following us! As I slowed down the car, we found ourselves in the middle of this flock of sheep as they were running down the road. It was like one of them saw our bright red wee car and decided to follow us. So now we're driving down the road in the middle of this group of sheep, not certain how we were going to extricate ourselves from them. So we drove slowly with sheep bleating all around us. Just as suddenly as they appeared, they veered off of the main road up a narrow single track road to the right and were gone, leaving us to marvel at it all. Still not another human in sight. We figured that there would be a bewildered farmer that night wondering where all of his sheep had gone. This flock was filled with sheep without a shepherd.

So it's not so much that sheep are just plain dumb after all. It's that without a shepherd, the sheep are likely to go astray, following whatever or whoever attracts their attention in the moment. I don't know about you, but since the scriptures portray us as sheep over and over again, I'm less uncomfortable with this understanding of sheep without a shepherd than with the understanding that sheep are just plain dumb.

When John talks about Jesus being a shepherd then—in this case the good shepherd—he's talking about the shepherd who leads the sheep, who leads us and loves us with a most perfect love. And in this season of Easter in which we are continuing to celebrate the gift of Jesus' resurrection after his death, the words, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," take on the full depth of meaning intended, for that's exactly what Jesus did for us when he went to his death on the cross.

Jesus the good shepherd is contrasted with the hired hand whose care for the sheep is limited by his or her own fallibility.

In our living we are confronted with a multitude of those who would have us follow them. Their voices compete with the voice of Jesus the good shepherd. It's where we put our trust and our comfort that reveals who it is we're following.

As Christians, of course we are striving to follow the good shepherd, for we have made the commitment to follow him in our daily living. But how do we know that we're truly following the good shepherd that comes from God? How do we know that we didn't somewhere along the way, with good intentions, follow the sheep in front of us, only to find that that sheep has gone astray and is no longer behind the good shepherd?

Jesus gives us a clue in the words that follow. "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." (Jn. 10:16)

There is perhaps no more powerful sentence in all of the Bible about God's intention for the people of the world. "So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

We know that we're following the good shepherd, Jesus, when we find that we're moving toward an ever widening circle that includes everyone—without reservation, without distinction, without discrimination. Are we building walls and fences? Or are we building bridges and entryways? Are we enacting requirements and prerequisites for membership? Or are we extending a broad, inclusive and gracious welcome to all?

The voice of Jesus the good shepherd is a voice for all. It is for us who know that voice, to in turn extend that same inclusive welcome to all those who are outside the flock in which we find ourselves.

When we gather for the Lord's Supper in just a bit, we do so at a table that is big and wide and inclusive. There will be those from north and south and from east and west gathered around the table where the good shepherd is host. When you come to the table this morning, do so enfolded in the love that comes from God in Jesus, the good shepherd.

Let us pray:

Almighty God,
you sent Jesus, our good shepherd,
to gather us together.
May we not wander from his flock,
but follow wherever he leads us,
listening for his voice and staying near him,
until we are safely in your fold,
to live with you forever;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.