

Being Sheep-ish

28 April 2024

The Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;*

³ he restores my soul.*

He leads me in right paths*
for his name's sake.

⁴ 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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely* goodness and mercy* shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

John 10:11-18

11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I 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. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it 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. I have received this command from my Father.'

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

What do you know about sheep?

The sheep and the shepherd is one of the most often used metaphors in the bible. Many of us could have probably recited the 23rd Psalm along with Josh a few minutes ago. It's that familiar. And Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd."

But I don't know much about sheep, do you?

In New Zealand, sheep outnumber people 7 to 1. In Washington, DC, in the year 2024? Not so much.

(Though I did learn that in 1914, 150 sheep were brought to West Potomac Park because they were expert at keeping the polo turf. And then in 1918, President Wilson acquired 18 sheep to tend the White House lawn so the gardeners could be off to the war effort. The sheep's wool was auctioned off to support the Red Cross to the tune of \$30,000.¹)

But today? Not many of us know much about sheep, and even less about tending them.

In my former congregation there was a family who owned a sheep farm.² And they gave me a lesson in sheep and shepherding. Through which, I think, Jesus intends for me to learn something about myself, about humans, and about God.

So here's what I have learned.

Sheep are prey animals. They have no natural defenses, which means they are totally dependent on their shepherd.

We are, when it comes down to it, totally dependent on others. Writer, pastor, and teacher Henri Nouwen talks about this dependency as one of his great spiritual learnings. He writes, "Substantial parts of our success, wealth, health, and relationships are influenced by events and circumstances over which we have little or no control."³

Of course we like to think we have control. We invest in insurance policies and national defense, and IRAs so that we will be safe, protected, successful, in control.

But the truth of the matter is the cancer comes back or the real estate market collapses or we happen to be born in Guatemala or Mexico instead of the United States. Life proves to us just how little control we have. We are dependent creatures.

Thank goodness we have a shepherd who cares for the sheep.

¹ <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2016/11/02/sheep-shearing-national-mall>

² Thank you to Nancy Turner Thompson for helping me understand sheep.

³ Nouwen, Henri. Adam. Orbis Books, 2012, p. 90.

I learned that *sheep are surprisingly tough creatures.*

My shepherdess friend taught me that sheep are much tougher than horses or goats. Sheep don't let on when they are sick or in pain. They try to keep up with the flock at all costs. So a wise shepherd has to be very attuned to her flock or the first sign of trouble will be a dead sheep.

And oh my goodness, doesn't that sound like us?

We put on our shiny church clothes and come into worship and tell our pew mates that everything is fine.

When actually our house was like WWII this morning,
or our hearts are breaking,
or depression and anxiety have us in their clutches,
or we're plumb worn out by the pace of our lives.

Thank goodness we have a shepherd who knows — intimately — each of the sheep.

Sheep are kind of smelly and dirty.

I'm not going to make a metaphor out of that.

Sheep need their flock. Sticking together is a sheep's only hope of survival. A sheep alone is a very unhappy and stressed out sheep.

Every one of us longs to be part of the flock. We long to belong. We long for connection. That's why we pull out our smart phones in the grocery store line or at the red light. It's why we scroll through Instagram and Facebook.

But there is an irony to our longing. MIT professor Sherry Turkle says that we long for connection but we are afraid of intimacy. And that's why social media is so enticing. Our technology gives us the illusion of companionship without the demands of intimacy.⁴

Psychotherapist Esther Perel said recently, "Modern loneliness masks as hyper-connectivity. ... I have a thousand friends, but no one to feed my cat ... 1,000 people who are giving me likes and dislikes, and all kinds of things that are now becoming the foundation of

⁴ http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together.html

my self-esteem. And that's a different kind of loneliness. It's not about being physically alone, it's about being misunderstood, unseen, rejected, ostracized."⁵

We connect with one another without really becoming known. Without really coming to know the other. And our hearts long to be seen and known and loved.

Thank goodness we have a shepherd who knows his own.

I am sure you know that sheep graze in pastures. But what I learned about sheep is that they are a bit short-sighted about their grazing. *As sheep eat they pull the grass out by the roots and it can't regrow on its own. That's why sheep have to be led by their shepherd to new pastures — left unattended, they destroy the very thing they need.*

I'm feeling a little too seen by this point.

While all of us could most likely pass the famous "marshmallow test," where we put off instant gratification. But in big and important ways we act to benefit ourselves in the short term with little regard for the impact in the long-term.

We drive our cars and hop on flights with little thought to the emissions that exacerbate global warming. We water our lawns and run our taps, taking for granted clean water. We add to the national debt and threaten to bankrupt social safety nets.

We pull our grass out by the roots, never mind the consequences.

Thank goodness we have a shepherd who leads us to green pastures.

Sheep will follow a leader, even if it's a dumb thing to do.

If one sheep gets moving in a given direction, even if it's dangerous, the others will follow.... to their own peril.

It makes me think of all the ways simply go along, when we KNOW they are not what is good.

Everyone else's kids are on social media, so I guess we'll let our kids on, too.

⁵ Unlocking Us podcast with Brene Brown. <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/new-ai-artificial-intimacy/>

Every other company is paying executives 300 times what the lowest-paid employees get,⁶
how can we compete if we don't do it too?
"It's tragic, but it's the cost of war," we might say.

We go along. Even when we know it is not what is good.

The idea that sheep will follow along, even if it's the wrong way to go also makes me think
of all the ways we go astray:
When we do the very things we hate.
When we ignore God's commandments.
When we overlook, instead of love, our neighbors.

Thank goodness we have a shepherd who leads us in the right path for his name's sake.

Sheep, my friend tells me, are trusting. They know their shepherd and they trust him.

Jesus talks about hired hands who flee at the sight of danger, who leave their posts when
wolves come.

My friend and fellow preacher Andrew Connors says,
"it is a rare human being who hasn't had their trust broken.
Trust broken in politicians or in the political process.
Trust broken in the church or in its pronouncements.
Trust broken as a child by an abusive adult.
Trust broken by a parent.
Trust broken by a stranger.
Trust in your body broken by an illness.
Trust broken by a friend. Trust broken in a marriage.
Trust broken in your dreams.
It is a rare human being who hasn't been injured or abandoned by those who are
charged to protect."⁷

We know what it is to have our trust broken and be left prey to the wolves.

Thank goodness we have a shepherd who does not run when the wolves come.

The sheep and the shepherd is one of the most often-used metaphors in the bible.

⁶ <https://drexel.edu/hunger-free-center/research/briefs-and-reports/minimum-wage-is-not-enough/ceo-pay-disparity/>

⁷ Andrew Foster Connors, in a paper on this text, written for The Well 2012.

I don't know much about sheep or about tending them.
But I do know what it's like
to be dependent, even if I act like I'm an island.
I know what it's like
to be tough, even when I'm breaking inside.
I know what it's like
to long to belong,
to be careless with the very things I need to survive.
I know what it's like
to go astray, even when I don't want to.
I know what it's like
to have someone I trust break it.

Thanks be to God, we have a shepherd - a good one.
One who leads us to green pastures and beside still waters,
who stays close in the darkest valleys.
One who shows us the right paths and restores our souls.

Thanks be to God, we have a shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep.
Amen.