

Good Shepherd Sunday Sermon

by Jan E.V. Hanson

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In the name of Christ who calls us ...

Good Shepherd Sunday has been part of our liturgy since the Book of Common Prayer used these ovine, "sheepy" lessons in 1549. Words like "pastoral care" draw their meaning and power from the image of Jesus as the kind and caring guide of the flock. The ancient Greek word *Episkopos* meant watching over, or overseer, and is the derivation for the crozier, or shepherd's crook that is the outward and visible sign of the office of our bishops.

John's gospel introduces us to Jesus with John the Baptist's proclamation, "Behold the Lamb of God" and later mentions the "Sheep-gate" where animals to be sacrificed were brought bleating into the temple, at the site of Jesus' healing on the Sabbath. Now Jesus himself mixes his metaphors (in a "figure of speech" that would sound typical to ancient Palestinians), saying "I am the Good Shepherd" and, "I am the gate" and again, comparing himself to the gatekeeper.

Archaeological evidence from Iran suggests that breeding sheep for wool may have began around 6000 B.C.E.. Sheep, lambs and rams are mentioned over 500 times in the Bible. On the other hand, most of us today have to think pretty hard to come up with a personal relationship in our lives with *Ovis Aries*, the sheep. I do have a lamb puppet named Agnes Day, who has a sister named Doris. In library school I wrote a paper on gate-keepers in information systems, but other than being a bit wooly and perhaps

putting readers to sleep, it really had nothing to do with sheep, either. The truth is, back in the days of the range wars of the Wild West, my forebears were raising cattle!

One summer in Aberdeen, our Vacation Bible School came up with the idea of having real lambs on the part of the church lawn we called "Bethlehem". My daughters were thrilled that we would be keeping the cute fuzzy creatures in our yard at night. – That was, until the middle of the 1st night when one of these "sweaters on the hoof" caught his head under the fence of the pen, trying to reach the grass that seemed greener on the other side. (poor little lamb, baa, baa, baa!) Since this became a nightly occurrence, and the pen was outside the girls' bedroom window, they were just as thrilled to see them go back to the farm on Friday as they had been to see them arrive on Monday.

Our cattle-ranching prejudices were confirmed; sheep were stupid. (Actually, any pig farmer could tell you that cattle and sheep have about equal intelligence, somewhat lower than hogs.) Sheep can remember a face, even a human face, after years have passed. (They all look like sheep to me!) Sheep have such excellent peripheral vision that they can see behind themselves without turning their heads. From mother to lamb, they learn to "heft" to their own pasture, and combined with their herding tendencies, they will congregate together, even on unfenced land. Yorkshire sheep have even demonstrated their problem-solving abilities by rolling on their backs across cattle gates! Sheep have a strong lead-follow tendency, but a leader, often as not, is simply the first sheep to move.

(and No, these are not any kind veiled commentary on the tendency of Episcopalians to keep a close eye on tradition, or to congregate where there are no fences!)

In many cultures, sheep are driven, using dogs, a staff or even a Dodge **Ram** pickup truck. Flocks of sheep in Spain or Scotland gave us the baleful eye, avoiding the strange pilgrims who trod on the pathways through *their* pasture. Last month, while on vacation, I saw sheep grazing near hogans, as we traveled through the Navajolands. We sang our Easter hymns in the Navajo language at the Church of the Good Shepherd, in AZ, while seven children were baptized.

In Palestine, sheep and goats from various flocks were kept in a sheepfold, watched at night by a gatekeeper. Traditionally, the nomadic shepherds will call their sheep, with a distinctive cry their own sheep recognize. Like the Navajo, the Palestinian nomads raise "rug sheep" acclimated to a drier climate, with a coarser, less oily wool. When the shepherd brings the sheep up from Canyon de Chelly to the rim in the springtime, the sheep *do* know their own shepherd's voice, just as the mixed herds in Palestine sheepfolds would separate, each eager to follow their own shepherd.

It's a long way from Christmas to Easter; it's a long way from the place where "shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground" to the True Paschal Lamb who "by his death has destroyed death, and by his rising to life again, has won for us everlasting life". In the Burial Rite we remember not only the Shepherd of the 23rd Psalm, but the Lamb who will wipe away every tear. The theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests that "the God who feeds and leads has maternal qualities, and in these verbs does what a mother does..." And in doing "what a mother does," we hear in the psalm the assurance that God turns situations of fear around into situations of joy. The metaphor of the caring shepherd goes beyond herding or even leading to tender, life-giving care,

because God "does everything that must be done so that the trusting sheep may live."
He came that we may have life, and have it abundantly."

Good Shepherd Sunday is not about animal husbandry! If Jesus were preaching here today, he probably would avoid the agrarian metaphors that are so far removed from our daily lives. Would he talk about miracles of healing? Would he talk about the miracle of the resurrection? Would he talk about the miracle of forgiveness? (Hannah Arendt said that the most radical claim of the Christian scriptures is not resurrection but forgiveness!) Would Jesus talk about the miracle that transformed a ragtag handful of fishermen, tentmakers, and tax collectors into apostles who actually sold their possessions, shared what they had in common, and spent time together in prayer, "breaking bread together with glad and generous hearts?" Would he talk about the miracle, that right now, right here at St. Stephen's, we are still listening for that still, small voice? That even now our prayers are centered on the very breath of God, blowing like the wind over the unformed oceans, creating new life, "cup running over" abundant life, a Spirit that goes ahead of us, leading us to welcome the strangers in our midst as beloved children?

Could the awesome wonders and signs be right here under our feet?

May be, or maybe not ... unless, in the words of Annie Dillard ...

"Unless, of course - Unless Christ's washing the disciples feet, their dirty toes, means what it possibly could mean: that it is all right to be human. That God knows we are human, and full of evil, all of us, and we are his people anyway, and the sheep of his pasture." -