

“SHEEP STORY”
Psalm 23; John 10:11-18
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
April 25, 2021

My grandson Allen is a big fan of the movie franchise, *Toy Story*, and I confess that I’ve become a devotee myself. These wonderful films feature toys and dolls that come alive when no humans are around and then get into all kinds of great adventures. One of the doll characters is Bo Peep, who watches after three porcelain sheep named Billy, Goat, and Gruff. The sheep are joined together and are sometimes mistakenly believed to be one sheep with three heads. And so, on occasion, “Toy Story” becomes a “sheep story.”

Well, this is the sort of story I propose to tell this morning – a story about sheep – because sheep are all over the two Scripture passages we’ve just read. Not literal sheep, of course, but rather, human beings who share some of the same characteristics as sheep. You may already be feeling resistance to hearing my “sheep story,” especially if I’m suggesting that you bear a resemblance to these woolen creatures!

I once attended a retreat which began with an icebreaker; you know, one of those goofy exercises to help participants get to know one another quickly. We were asked to name an animal that we identify with – perhaps a lion or a horse or a dog – in any case, an animal that symbolizes something about our personalities. It’s an intriguing exercise. If you were asked to name an animal who reminds you of yourself, which one would you choose?

Thinking back on that retreat, I honestly don’t remember which animal I said I was like, but I’m certain of one thing: I didn’t say that I identify with a sheep! I don’t know anyone who would admit to that. Sheep are not regarded as royalty in the animal kingdom; they have a reputation for being dumb and easily disoriented; they are followers more than leaders; they are “high maintenance” creatures who require a great deal of care and protection. Sheep can’t be left to their own devices; they have to be watched and tended. Most of us like to think of ourselves as smarter and more self-sufficient than a sheep.

And yet, when the Bible uses the image of an animal to describe the people of God, the animal of choice is usually a sheep. The psalms quoted in today’s Call to Worship refer to the people of Israel as the “sheep of [God’s] pasture” (Psalm 100:3) and the “sheep of [God’s] hand” (97:7). The author of the beloved 23rd Psalm doesn’t directly call himself a sheep, but it’s clear from the imagery he uses that this is the animal he identifies with. In today’s reading from John’s Gospel, Jesus explicitly refers to his human followers as “sheep” (John 10:11), which is a bit disconcerting. Elsewhere in John, Jesus calls his disciples “brothers” and “friends”; why would he also refer to us as “sheep,” of all things?

What we need to realize is that this label is not intended to be a put-down. Sheep are not a part of our landscape and economy in western Connecticut. Typically, you and I never observe sheep except in petting zoos. But sheep are an everyday fixture for those who live out in the countryside of ancient Palestine. The biblical writers know sheep; they have a more complete and balanced view of these creatures. On the positive side, they know that sheep are not stupid; they are in fact intelligent animals who have the good sense to stick together, much like Billy, Goat,

and Gruff in the movie *Toy Story*. At the same time, the prophet Isaiah acknowledges that sheep can “go astray” from their flock (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus himself devotes one of his most famous parables to a sheep who gets “lost” (Luke 15:3-7). The biblical writers know that sheep are sometimes shy and easily spooked – what we would call “sheepish” – but for good reason. Sheep know by instinct and experience that they are vulnerable to predators, that they need guidance and protection.

Which leads us to note that there are other characters in our “sheep story” besides sheep. Jesus quickly identifies the wolf as a threat to sheep: “the wolf snatches them and scatters them,” he says (v. 12b). And this is where Jesus first makes the connection between his human followers and a sub-human species called sheep. It’s not that his followers are lacking in intelligence; it’s that they are vulnerable – vulnerable to attack from the forces of evil.

Jesus doesn’t specify who the wolf is in their midst, but we surmise that he’s referring to the political and religious authorities who persecute his followers in the 1st Century. You and I understand this threat, because the wolf still stalks the Church in the 21st Century. We encounter individuals who condemn the Christian faith as a dangerous fantasy; we know of governments and societies who do violence to Christian minorities. Even in religiously free America, those who advocate for justice in the name of Christ are vulnerable to criticism and even physical harm. The wolf is always lurking in the grass around the perimeter of the sanctuary.

But the Church’s enemies are not always outsiders; the wolf can appear in sheep’s clothing inside our own pasture. False teachers and divisive leaders still abound in Christian communities, leading to confusion and destructive conflict. In our time as in Jesus’s time, the “flock” of Christ’s Church needs to be kept safe from those who would undermine their faith and destroy their lives.

This being the case, Jesus quickly introduces two other characters to the “sheep story” who are called to perform a protective role: the “hired hand” and the “good shepherd.” The two stand in stark contrast to each other.

For the hired hand, protecting sheep is just a job. The hired hand has no personal or financial investment in the animals under his watch; his only interest is earning a paycheck for himself. When the wolf appears on the scene, the hired hand scatters as quickly as the sheep. Again, Jesus doesn’t identify who he is referring to in church circles, but we can make an educated guess. At the time John writes his Gospel, there are apparently pastors-for-pay who resign quickly when difficulties arise. The early Christians struggle to survive; they experience conflict among themselves and even greater conflict with those on the outside; and pastors who are under fire and are half-hearted in their commitment run screaming for the exits.

Sadly, this pattern has been repeated throughout the centuries. Today, the drop-out rate in professional ministry is alarmingly high. Some pastors quit because they feel abused or burned out, and I have sympathy for those who get caught in this trap. But some clergy leave their posts for reasons they are more reluctant to admit. Ministry is both a career and a calling; and, quite frankly, some clergy are more focused on their career – on climbing the vocational ladder and tending sheep in greener pastures. They view themselves not as shepherds but as hired hands, and when the going gets tough and the rewards are minimal, they check out. When they become disappointed in their career, they abandon their calling.

After I moved from the Texas Conference to the New York Conference in 2007, I had a revealing conversation with my new District Superintendent. I told him that I had known a lot of pastors in my previous setting who were obsessed with upward mobility – always jockeying for position, looking to serve a bigger and better church, seeking to enhance their salary – and were completely open and shameless about their ambition. I told my new DS that I didn't see that pattern in the New York Conference. I hadn't heard anyone pining for plumb appointments. The DS chuckled and replied, "That's because there are no plumb appointments! Nearly all of the churches in the New York Conference are small and struggling. The pastors who succeed are those who choose to grow where they are planted; they develop staying power."

Well, I beg to differ with my former DS on his first point. For me, the Woodbury United Methodist Church has been a plumb appointment! But his overall perspective was right on target. As I approach mandatory retirement from full-time ministry, I've thought a lot about why I was able to endure in this profession for 45 years. I am certainly no stronger, or nobler, or more talented in all areas than other clergy. The only reason I can give for my staying power is that, to me, ministry is more of a calling than a career. God knows, there have been detours and difficulties, setbacks and disappointments along the way; but I have run the race with perseverance because I was not just following a career path; I was responding to a calling. By the grace of God, I'm not just a hired hand who is easily swayed by the ebbs and flows of church life and is always looking for a better deal somewhere else. Rather, God has placed me in the role of a shepherd; and though I have been far from perfect as a keeper of the flock, I have felt content and challenged and fulfilled in whatever pasture I've been placed.

I have felt at home especially in this pasture, at the corner of Main and Church streets in Woodbury. Over the years, I've observed that laypersons can also behave like hired hands, even though they are volunteers. When they see the first sign of trouble, or when they don't get their own way, or when they get their feelings hurt, some laypersons choose to cut and run. But it doesn't have to be so, as many of you have amply demonstrated. I have been inspired by those of you who didn't abandon your church during its darkest hours. You hung in there, kept hoping, and kept working for a better day. For you, being a committed layperson wasn't just a job you could take or leave; it was your calling to fulfill. You were like sheep who heard the voice of your shepherd and chose to stick with your flock. And like a true shepherd, you felt called to protect the heritage of your church and provide for its future.

We come then to the other character in our "sheep story" who is charged with a protective role, the "good shepherd." What makes the shepherd "good" is that he is fully invested in his sheep. He has a sense of ownership and responsibility for his flock that the hired hand never has. He knows his sheep by name and cares for them individually. He will not abandon his sheep when they are in turmoil among themselves or under attack from those on the outside. He will lay down his life to protect his current flock from harm. He will even adopt "other sheep that do not belong to this fold" (v. 16a).

Notice, our "sheep story" really has very little to say about the sheep themselves; it is more about the good shepherd and how he relates to his sheep. Notice further that the "good shepherd" is not identified as the ideal pastor or layperson in a church, because no such person exists. The good shepherd is Christ himself. This is a story about Christ's love and loyalty to his followers, who are vulnerable, fearful, and prone to lose their way. This is a story about Christ's acceptance of others who may not yet belong to his Church but whom he chooses to embrace – "the least, the

last, and the lost,” perhaps those who are different from us in appearance and belief and lifestyle, who don’t fit into our narrow definitions of Church.

Which brings us back to where we began. When Christ calls his followers “sheep,” it is not a term of derision; it is a term of endearment. Christ is saying that he loves his followers as a good shepherd loves his sheep. He respects us as worthy individuals, but he recognizes that we are vulnerable and cares for us accordingly. As the good shepherd, he reaches out not just to good sheep, but to lost sheep and black sheep.

Do you want to know the real reason I’ve remained in the ordained ministry for 45 years? To be honest with you, there have been times when, like the hired hand, I’ve wanted to cut and run. There have been times when, like a sheep under attack, I’ve been besieged by difficulties and felt abandoned by those who might have helped. But I have never, ever felt abandoned by Christ. He has never said, “I’m moving on to greener pastures and more reliable sheep.” He has remained faithful to his unfaithful flock. I’ve been immensely grateful to be one of his sheep, and even one of his junior shepherds. I pray that you feel this same gratitude.