**April 22, 2018**

**John 10:11-18; 1 John 3:16-24**

I grew up on the back of a horse farm. It wasn’t my family’s farm, but it was definitely my place. Even from inside my house I could see the rolling pastures with different equine exercise equipment scattered about, and the different barns for hay and tobacco and horses and the one that was barely standing up. I watched the horses run in the storms, and huddle together at night. I knew the places where I could easily bend the fence and slip into the field. I knew which horses were gentle, and the grasses they liked. Spending time in the pasture, and with the animals, was (and continues to be) my idea of the good life.

Many of my extended family have agricultural and animal farms; maybe it’s in my blood. It’s a hardworking lifestyle regardless of what you tend. But no one in my family farms sheep. So this week I read a bit from the *Modern Farmer* magazine. (Did you know this was a thing?) One second-career sheep farmer lives in the Blue Ridge range of the Appalachian mountains (actually near my own family). He wrote about the things he had learned since taking on this ancient profession, admitting that shepherds have historically been on the lowest rungs of society. The care of sheep has always been left to those on the margin of society – the youngest and oldest workers, the migrants, emancipated slaves, the untouchables and the loners. Shepherding was for people who need to do *some*thing with their lives, but couldn’t do something better. It’s for people who are willing to get their hands dirty. It’s for people who want to be alone and can stay up late.

Shepherding requires more hands-on work than other livestock because of the sheep’s vulnerability. The sheep need help finding food and staying together and even having babies; lambing often requires human intervention, while the births of cows and chickens and other domesticated animals generally go untended.

One shepherd wrote in *Modern Farmer* that, “Shepherds, like the sheep themselves, learn quickly that the path to success depends on tending to the flock and caring for the individual... This means being able to identify a sick or injured sheep or lamb within a flock of hundreds or thousands of sheep… assisting with the birth of a lamb when needed, [and] caring for a lamb orphaned by its mother…” [[1]](#footnote-1) Shepherding requires intimate knowledge of both the individual sheep and the collective flock. This knowledge doesn’t come from a book, any more than parenting can happen without direct interaction with your children. Shepherds must spend time with the flock, watching and caring, and learning each sheep’s personality. As they do, they learn which sheep are good mothers, and which sheep are slow to get up the hill. They remember which sheep are drawn to a certain spot and notice which ones have gotten lost. Shepherds watch and learn in order to lead and care.

Although it is not on history’s list of most respected professions, shepherding was common to many biblical characters. Jacob did it. David did it. Of course, Jesus’ birth was heralded by the shepherds. And God told the prophets over and over and over again that God was a shepherd – not of sheep, but that God was the people’s shepherd.

It’s interesting that despite the less than noble reputation, and the hard work involved, that this is the role God wants to take in creation. This is the guiding metaphor for how God will be in relationship with us. **Repeatedly**, God reassured the people and exclaimed that God will be the Good Shepherd. The people of God will not be scattered. The people of God will not be lost. The people of God will not be left behind or given to the wolves. God will go with us, leading us to food and water, guiding us through shadowed valleys and hard places, anointing us and naming us God’s own, even giving us abundance. Goodness (with a capital “G”) will watch over us all the days of our lives, leading us to the eternal feast in God’s house.

Maybe you have heard the expression that God doesn’t have any grandchildren, only children; parents have direct responsibility for a child’s wellbeing. There are no vacations or days off. A parent wakes up in the middle of the night when their child is sick or scared, even if the parents themselves are exhausted and sleep-deprived. Parents will wake up every night, for endless weeks and months, because their child needs them. Parents make sure their children get enough to eat and appropriate clothing and all of the essentials. Not just for 5 years or 18 years, but for their lifetime. Parents are with the children day in and day out, providing, guiding, loving, supporting until death separates them. This is a priceless gift that costs more than any parent realizes at the beginning: heartache and sleepless nights last well into a child’s adulthood. Unexpected phone calls and gut-wrenching conversations are part of the toll.

Almighty God, Creator of us all, Mother and Father of us all, is the shepherd of us all. God is not the hired hand who will abandon us when it is convenient. God will not take a vacation when the workload is overwhelming. Jesus didn’t leave us for the wolves in this world, but went after them. Jesus gave his own life in order that our lives would be saved. Even though it didn’t help or enhance God’s own self to do so, God does not place God’s own needs above our own. Even when we walk through the dark valley and hard places, God’s rod and staff are with us, comforting us, and pulling us down a more righteous path.

Not just shepherding one of us, but tending to the whole lot of us; neither sheep nor humans live in isolation. Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that no one cares, or no one notices, or that we are out here living life on our own, but we are not alone. Just as Evan Hansen discovers in the Broadway show, no one is lost or forgotten. #youwillbefound It’s not enough to simply say that we are not alone, but it’s important to go a step further and admit that there are implications for living in the flock.

Sheep are naturally fearful and vulnerable; they flock together out of an instinctual knowledge that there is safety in numbers. They understand that it is bad to lag behind or get lost. They know that they should not be in a pasture by themselves. They have little defense against wolves or harsh terrain. So they protect themselves and the group by staying together. For the group benefits when each individual member is well fed and healthy.

So it is good for us to watch our own steps, mindful that others might follow us. It is good for us to go carefully, aware that we could be leading others into trouble, however well-intentioned our exploring might be. And it is good for us to recognize that God called us together for a reason.

But it is not our role to be the gatekeeper of this flock. That job is given to the shepherd.

I find the most challenging verse in John’s text here is Jesus’ declaration that, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them. They will listen to my voice.” It all sounded so nice and cozy until this verse. *Other* sheep? *What* other sheep? Do we have any say about who those sheep are? What if we don’t want other sheep in our flock?

The psalmist also declared that God will feed us “in the presence of our enemies.” We will be living and eating and in intimate situations with those whom we do not know or like or think are our tribe. And God wants to shepherd us together?! This is what some theologians call God’s “kin-dom.” Not a KinGdom, but “kin” (family) community. God shepherds all us sheep together from north and south, east and west, bringing us to sit at table and become family with others from around time and space. So that we will be family with those whom we like and love, and those whom we do not know or care for, and those whom we may actively dislike or distrust or even hurt. Although something else may have defined our family or tribe before – last name or language or country or political party – but now we are all heaped in together. Kin folk with one another because of our shared shepherd, Jesus Christ.

What is it like when those sheep join the flock?

It’s like when women in this country demanded the right to vote. It’s like when black Americans demanded equal civil rights. It’s like when Syrians are forced out of their homes because of ongoing war, and knock on our country’s door seeking safety and lodging. When other sheep join our flock, it’s disruptive. It is often unwanted or ignored by certain members of the flock, though it is holy and glorious and a picture of God’s kin-dom.

This very week Sweet Hollow is invited to care for an Afghani refugee family who arrived at JFK on Tuesday. They have a tragic story, like most people labeled “refugee.” They are nothing like us, and yet they are everything like us. They are God’s beloved children. In need of a good shepherd and a good flock.

So let us be encouraged by the writer of 1 John: “Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in truth or action.” Go out into the world this week with the intent to be a good sheep, following the shepherd, and inviting other sheep to do the same. Don’t lag behind or live in such a way that would misdirect anyone (however unintentionally that may be). Build up the flock. Rejoice in your place in the flock, and the care you receive from our Good Shepherd.

1. https://modernfarmer.com/2013/12/10-things-learned-lambs/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)