

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, April 26, 2015

Fourth Sunday of Easter – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Ezekiel 34:1-5 (NRSV)

The word of the Lord came to me: “Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.”

John 10:1-5, 10-16 (NRSV)

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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.”

Over the years, I've learned some interesting things about actual sheep and shepherds and shepherding—not from direct personal experience, since I grew up in a 1950's suburb in western Massachusetts and not on a farm—but from observation and reading. I've also learned some interesting things about myself as a metaphorical shepherd, as a pastor (the English word “pastor” being derived from the Latin word for shepherd).

I think my earliest observation of sheep and shepherds and shepherding happened at the Blue Hill Fair in Blue Hill, Maine, about 45 years ago, during the sheepdog trials. Traditional sheep herding in Europe and North America is a collaborative enterprise involving a single shepherd and a single sheep dog—often a border collie. During sheepdog trials, the shepherd guides his or her dog to herd a small flock of five sheep through a series of gates, something like a slalom. The shepherd often stands still, communicating with the dog through whistles or words or hand gestures, and the dog does most of the actual herding.

Sometimes the five sheep stay close together and are relatively easy to herd; occasionally there will be one or two ornery sheep in this small flock that make it much harder on the dog and on the shepherd. I remember seeing a flock like this at the Blue Hill Fair: one ornery sheep was not the least bit interested in allowing the dog to rule the flock, and so it took this particular shepherd and border collie team much longer to get the sheep through the gates and to the finish line—by which time the poor dog was completely exhausted.

Growing up in the suburbs in the 1950's, I suppose that when I heard the words of the 23rd Psalm or the portrayal of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, I would have imagined “an [idyllic], bucolic scene of rolling green hills and lush meadows, over which the fluffy (and remarkably clean) sheep roam with their serene (if slightly bored) shepherd.”¹ What I observed at the sheepdog trials at the Blue Hill Fair was quite different from this serene bucolic scene.

In first-century Palestine, Jesus' use of shepherd imagery to convey his ministry would have evoked in the minds of his hearers a scene quite different from either the lush meadows of rural North America or the somewhat dusty fairgrounds at the Blue Hill Fair. To this day, shepherds in the Middle East do not use dogs to help them herd their sheep. The rolling hills in many parts of Jordan that I saw a few years ago were mostly brown, not green; and sources of drinking water were few and far between. It was not an easy task for a shepherd to find green pastures or still waters for a flock of sheep, or to protect them from predators. The shepherd was often right in the middle of the flock, and no doubt smelled strongly of sweat and sheep.

In Jesus' time, in order to keep the flock safe at night, a shepherd would create a temporary fenced-in sheepfold, and once the sheep were in the fold, the shepherd would sleep on the ground across the entrance to the fold. Sometimes a shepherd could herd the flock into a cave and then sleep on the ground across the entrance to the cave.

A British visitor to Palestine in the 1920's, H. V. Morton, wrote a book about his experiences called *In the Steps of the Master*. “Early one morning,” he wrote, “I saw an extraordinary sight not far from Bethlehem. Two shepherds had evidently spent the night with their flocks in a cave. The sheep were all mixed together and the time had come for the shepherds to go in different directions. One of the shepherds stood some distance from the sheep and began to call. First one, then another, then four or five animals ran towards him;

¹ Sarah Dylan Breuer, lectionary blog for Easter IV, year B. Accessed online on 04-30-09 at <http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/ezekiel/>.

and so on until he had counted his whole flock.”² The sheep followed their shepherd because they knew his voice.

Here in our time and place, we are followers of the Good Shepherd, and we follow him because we know his voice. We follow him because we trust his voice. We follow him because he has promised never to abandon us. We follow the Good Shepherd because through him, we know what God is like. We follow him even through the valley of the shadow of death, doing our best not to fear evil, not to be overcome by evil, but to walk in paths of righteousness. We believe that following Jesus the Good Shepherd will ultimately lead us out of the valley of the shadow of death.

Until recently, I had never really noticed that Jesus’ words about shepherding in this lectionary passage from John’s Gospel are directed not toward his followers but toward his adversaries—his adversaries in this particular context being the Pharisees.

It’s quite likely that in using shepherd imagery, Jesus was alluding to a passage from the prophet Ezekiel that is highly critical of the “shepherds of Israel,” the leaders who were responsible for the people’s well-being but instead sought only to secure their own well-being: You feed only yourselves and not the sheep. “You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.”

That’s a pretty harsh indictment, as is Jesus’ indirect indictment of the Pharisees in comparing them with “the hired hand, who sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

Fast forward from the first century to the twenty-first century: the relationship between a shepherd and a flock is a longstanding traditional image for the relationship between a pastor and a congregation. There are good shepherds—and Jesus is the embodiment, the true image of the good shepherd. There are good pastors who genuinely care for their congregations, who are concerned to guide their congregations in the way of Jesus and to protect them from the metaphorical wolves of the world.

There are also irresponsible shepherds who feed themselves instead of feeding the sheep. There are irresponsible pastors who fleece their flocks, so to speak. And then there are the hired hand pastors, the free agent religious professionals, who aren’t so much afraid of wolves, but are always on the lookout for greener pastures for themselves, so to speak.

Before I move on from the shepherding metaphor, I want to reassure you that you are not an ornery flock of sheep, like those five sheep I watched at the Blue Hill Fair many years ago. And as I read your history, it’s clear to me that for virtually all of your 315 years as a congregation, you have been served by good shepherds.

I’m certainly not opposed to viewing the relationship between a pastor and a congregation through the lens of the shepherding metaphor. One of the early books about interim ministry was a collection of essays with the title *Temporary Shepherds*. But as I’ve said to you before, I have come to prefer the metaphor of serving as a wilderness guide for a congregation that has embarked on a wilderness journey.

² H. V. Morton, *In the Steps of the Master*. London, 1934. Quoted at <http://umblepie-northernterritory.blogspot.com/2012/08/in-steps-of-master-once-more.html>.

This morning, in just a few minutes, we will begin the third in our series of congregation-wide conversations in the wilderness. The theme for today's conversation is "mission and vision." In our previous conversation on March 22, we came up with several different proposals (in 25 words or less) for a contemporary mission statement for our church. We'll begin today's conversation by reviewing these proposals, to discern whether we can adopt, combine, revise, or rewrite them into a consensus mission statement.

If you haven't attended one or both of our previous congregation-wide conversations, please don't hesitate to join in today's conversation. There are no prerequisites in this process of discernment. I believe that every member has something to contribute to this process—after all, you're not only a flock of sheep wandering in the wilderness. You're also a covenant community, "bound together and finely woven with love," in the words of singer/songwriter Ken Medema.³

As a flock of sheep, you're following the Good Shepherd, because you know his voice and trust his voice. As a covenant community, you're seeking to discern where the Good Shepherd might be leading you in the future.



³ <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/orders/2004/04-02-01.htm#call>.