

The shepherd within us

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2009.

I know my own and my own know me.

John 10:14

Perhaps no other imagery is more endearing than that of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The scriptures are full of references to shepherds and their flocks of sheep. Jacob cares for Laban's flock in order to obtain a bride, Moses shepherds the flock of his father-in-law Jethro and David, full of grace and charm, plays his harp and sings while tending his flock before being anointed by Samuel to be King of Israel. The prophet Ezekiel tells how God cares for the nation of Israel as a shepherd cares for his flock. The shepherds in Bethlehem are the first to visit the newborn child of Joseph and Mary. Perhaps the most endearing image of a shepherd is found in the twenty-third psalm in which we are assured that our needs will be supplied. The prepared table and the overflowing cup remind us of the bountiful blessings we enjoy.

Yet, few sights are as rare in twenty-first century American landscape than a shepherd leading his flock. We just don't see them. Wherever there are sheep, we see them enclosed in a fenced in field. There are few if any free ranging herds of sheep led by shepherds through open pastures that we read in the Bible.

In biblical times, as in most eastern countries today, the shepherd leads his flock by walking ahead of them where they see him with his crook to fend off attacks from predators. At night, he herds his sheep into the protective confines of the sheepfold and lies across the entrance to prevent any predatory animals from entering. A hired hand might flee at the first sign of danger but the true shepherd can be trusted to stay with them in times of danger. He calls them each by name and they respond only to his voice.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd knows each of us and cares for us because he laid down his own life for us. There are those outside his flock whom he intends to bring in to be part of the one flock with one shepherd. There will be no outcasts; no one is excluded for any reason, be it race, culture, gender, orientation or social status.

In traveling in the Holy Land you can see that most of the landscape remains virtually the same as it was in ancient biblical times. It is very rocky and not arable for farming with little vegetation for grazing. Bedouin shepherds lead their flocks just as in ancient times. These nomadic peoples eat unleavened bread and live in tents all year round in the manner of their ancestors. We once visited a shepherd and his family in their tent where we were served tea. It is obvious that a shepherd's life is not easy. They remain with their all flock day and at night they gather their flock in with them to protect them against predators and thieves. In Western countries, sheep are kept primarily for their meat while in Eastern countries they are valued for their wool and thus remain with the herd for a longer time. The sheep will not respond to any other voice other than their own shepherd.

The imagery of God's people as sheep is not altogether flattering. Sheep are not very bright and because of their submissive and docile nature they are easily led astray. We can be like that. We will follow anyone who promises us something we think we want only to be taken advantage of and exploited. We can't expect God to rescue us from trouble nor can we expect to be shielded from harm. The reality is that innocent people suffer under circumstances such as disease and natural disasters that are beyond their control. Whole populations of civilians are laid

waste by tyrannous despots. Economic, political, social and religious zealots take advantage of vulnerable people. We wonder how a loving and caring God allows such things to happen. It is one thing to accept bad things happening to good people, but there is no justice in good things happening to bad people.

As creatures of God with the gift of free will, we exercise our right to make choices and accept responsibility for our own actions. We cannot expect God to rescue us when we make wrong decisions. While we create many of our own circumstances, we have to live with those things which are beyond our control.

I like to think that having an informed conscience is like following Jesus as the shepherd of my soul. We aren't born with a conscience, it has to be informed to guide us when we are tempted to do wrong, when we are headed in the wrong direction and when we need to be mindful of the feelings and concerns of others. When our conscience clicks in, it is as though Jesus the Good Shepherd is walking ahead, looking out for predators of any sort who might tempt to lead us in the paths of unrighteousness.

While we may feel secure in God's care for us, we can't expect to be saved from the trouble we get ourselves into and when we do, God redeems all that by helping us to learn from our mistakes. Nor can we expect God to keep us from trials and tribulations beyond our control. God is with us when we are going through those hard times over which we have no control. God knows each of us by name and every time we are tempted to go wrong, God speaks to us through our informed conscience to guide us to what is right, to help us to love those who are difficult to love, and to be aware of others when we are distracted with our own concerns.

The imagery of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and pastor is helpful when we parenting our children and when we find ourselves caretakers of a parents or spouse. When situations get difficult and challenging, there is comfort in knowing that Jesus as our Shepherd guides us along the paths of righteousness.

I can trust someone like that. I hope you can, too.
