

Sermon Easter IV A 2017

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

May 7, 2017

Bill Watson

On this fourth Sunday of Easter, Jesus employs the metaphor of sheep and shepherds. For the gospel writer John and his community this metaphor had power. Yet, life in Lynchburg is pretty far removed from understanding the ways of sheep and their need for shepherds.

In the Middle East of Jesus' day, shepherds were essential to raising and caring for sheep. Each night shepherds would gather their flocks together in a sheepfold. They would take turns staying up and guarding the gate to the fold. Then in the morning, the gate was opened and the sheep would recognize the voice of their shepherd who would lead them to safe paths for grazing.

But being bedded down in the sheepfold is not without risk of others breaking in. Jesus says some come to take advantage of the sheep. Some slip in another way to pillage, profit, abuse and destroy. Some view sheep as just another commodity. While we are pretty far removed from sheep, we know that the phrase, fleece the sheep, has more than one meaning.

The gospel's description of Jesus as the Good Shepherd echoes the images contained in the beloved 23rd Psalm. Psalm 23 begins "The Lord is my shepherd." The shepherd leads and guides along the way even making one lie down by still waters. Yet that concept can seem awfully foreign to us. I like to think that I don't need a shepherd. I value my autonomy. "I can do it myself," my son used to say. I was proud to hear him say this.

As we heard the lesson from the Book of Acts we realized just how different our culture is from the early Christian community described there. "Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were

together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” They held all things in common goes against our sense of individuality and autonomy. This sounds like socialism.

We want to be free to do as we please. We favor autonomy and independence. We want to chart our own course. And we have all sorts of assistance at doing just that.

I’m not so sure that we can identify with Jesus as our shepherd? And who wants to think of themselves as sheep? Today so much has evolved that this seems a distant concept indeed. We’re tempted to believe we have no need of a shepherd to guide us.

Just when we think that this passage has no ability to speak to us, we look again at the ending. Jesus concluded the passage with the phrase that scholars believe to be the theme of the gospel of John. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10). We know what an abundant life means to us. Jesus said that he came to bring abundant life and we want the freedom to enjoy that abundance. But I’m afraid Jesus has something else in mind.

If we are following Jesus, what might Jesus have in mind in our day. (WWJHUD?) What would Jesus have us do? Well, we must begin by looking at what Jesus did if we are to continue to be his hands in the world. Jesus was a teacher. So, how do we shepherd others through education? Jesus was a healer, so what does that say about our care of others and their access to health care? Jesus cast out demons, so what does that say about providing mental health care to all. Jesus came as an alternative to those who steal and kill. Does that have implications for how we look out for others. What does it mean to be there for others? Does it mean following on Facebook only? Or is there more? What about those who don’t have nearly as many resources? “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” What did Jesus do? He fed the hungry, taught, healed the sick, cast out demons, ate with friends. These are ways that Jesus offered abundance to others. These signs involved sharing as the apostles’ lives demonstrated.

Yet much in our world acts to separate us from one another. We are far removed from the community in Acts that held things in common.

Abundance can separate us.

For one, our very abundance can separate us. We read a good bit about the economic disparity in society. The economically prosperous and the less fortunate. For many of us, we are pretty removed as economic disparity has a way of erecting barriers between members of the same community.

Technology can also have a separating effect.

In an age when I can get all the help I need with a voice prompt, “Siri show me the nearest restaurants or gas stations.” I’m not thinking I need a shepherd. A good smart phone will do the trick just fine. And it’s not leading and guiding me. I prefer to do that myself.

Last week I was teaching at a Credo conference in CA. I arrived late on Sunday night and had a two hour drive from San Francisco to Healdsburg. But I wasn’t worried, I had GPS maps on my phone. It was late and dark. I followed the line on the GPS map and had no opportunity to notice what went by as I passed landmarks both geographic and cultural. I did not need them. I had a route on my device (which as long as it had a charge was reliable). I did not have to think for myself. Or even engage with my environment as I went.

Then coming back on Friday afternoon, I again reached for the mapping assistance. It had been dark when I arrived, but now I couldn’t see my surroundings for the incredible traffic. The traffic was so bad that I couldn’t look around in wonder. If I didn’t see the landmarks, I certainly couldn’t appreciate the people who lived and worked there.

And how our brains work **can separate us** as well. While our cultural context has changed greatly with time, our biological makeup hasn’t fully adapted. We view the world with a kind of negativity bias. As we evolved, this bias assisted us. Always scanning the environment for danger and threat. Deep within our psyches is the primitive searching and scanning. Reinforced by the news and politicians. “If it bleeds, it leads.”

This primitive negativity bias has a way of restricting our view. Of limiting our gaze, so that we may fail to see all the possibilities around us. And what

comes into view is first viewed and scanned with suspicion. This innate fear may limit our ability to respond out of concern for our own safety. When we give in to the negativity bias, we limit our responses. We don't perceive the full breadth of possible options. We reduce things to fight or flight. Stimulus and response. In the very short time between the stimulus and our response lies our freedom. Our freedom to choose our response.

I believe that Jesus has called us disciples and that we are to be focused on abundant life. That involves recognizing our common humanity. Not just looking out for ourselves. That is a far too primitive an outlook and response. Surprisingly, things like technology, survival reflexes, and economic well-being which can open the world to us can also paradoxically and strangely limit us as well.

We may be so focused on our pathway or GPS map that we fail to see those we are passing by. Maybe GPS will evolve someday to make us aware of what and whom we are passing on our left or right. But we have a long way to go to get there. Till then we must decide.

We can choose to follow Jesus. We can seek to understand what Jesus might be hoping for. Because you see, Jesus is depending on us. We can approach life from a sense of abundance and gratitude. Life is really all about choices. We all have the same number of hours in the day. How we choose to spend those hours is up to us.

Jesus came that we may see a way forward to extend ourselves in love to one another. That we really do find a way to share the resources that God's love provides. That we find a way to move away from a bias of scarcity and fear into a life filled with abundance. Then we too can share and enrich others. The choices reside with us. Life is all about choices. Contrary to what we might think, we have choices and possibilities.

We have a choice. We can choose to follow the good shepherd who calls us each by name. To share God's saving work in the world - to welcome all to abundant life in the name of our Savior.