

Jon Hauerwas – “Which Sheep?” – September 18, 2016
Psalm 100 and Luke 15:1-10

When pastors encounter sheep and shepherding language in the Bible, we often use these images to tell our congregations that sheep are not very bright. But, as soon as we begin to bask in our own intellectual superiority, we are jolted by the punchline – that we are actually the daft ones in this metaphor. Yes. We are the stumbling, bumbling sheep – totally dependent upon God, our shepherd. And what at first seemed like an amusing riff on these foolish flocks becomes, instead, an indictment of our own, personal shortcomings.

I recently read a book entitled *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. It was written by one Philip Keller. And while I know that we have an accomplished man in our own congregation who shares this name, the author is different. This Philip Keller was born in Kenya in 1920. He trained as an agronomist at the University of Toronto, in Canada, and spent many years in agricultural research, land management and ranch development in British Columbia. Later, he pursued ecological studies in East Africa which led to new careers in conservation, wildlife photography and journalism.

In his book, Keller never claims that sheep are daft. Instead, he prefers to think of them as stubborn. It is this trait, he claims, which gets them “into the most

ridiculous and preposterous dilemmas.”¹ Citing his own experience as a keeper of flocks, Keller writes, “I have seen my own sheep, greedy for one more mouthful of green grass, climb down steep cliffs where they slipped and fell into the sea. Only my long shepherd’s staff could lift them out of the water back onto solid ground again.”²

“Another common occurrence,” he notes, “was to find sheep stuck fast in labyrinths of wild roses or brambles where they had pushed in to find a few stray mouthfuls of green grass. Soon the thorns were so hooked in their wool they could not possibly pull free, tug as they might. Only the use of a staff could free them from their entanglement.”³

So it is with us, he adds. “Many of our jams and impasses are of our own making. In stubborn, self-willed, self-assertion we keep pushing ourselves into a situation where we cannot extricate ourselves. Then in tenderness, compassion, and care our Shepherd comes to us, draws near to us, and by the power of the Holy Spirit lifts us out of the difficulty and dilemma. What patience God has with us! What longsuffering and compassion! What forgiveness!”⁴

¹ Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 102.

² *Ibid.* Pg. 102-103.

³ *Ibid.* Pg. 103.

⁴ *Ibid.* Pg. 103.

This concept of God as the shepherd of God's people is an enduring biblical legacy. Just take, for instance, Isaiah, chapter 40. There we find: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." Parallel images are found in Psalms 23, 28, 78, 80 and 100, which is our first lesson this morning, as well as in the prophetic books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah.

Jesus, then, was standing on a firm biblical foundation when he boldly claimed in John, chapter 10: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I know my own and my own know me... 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."

What do you suppose that this means? – this declaration that there are other sheep which do not belong to this fold. I imagine that most of us would assume that we are talking about other Christians – Episcopalians, and Methodists, and Lutherans, and on and on and on. But is this, perhaps, a way of acknowledging all people as children of God, even those who currently follow other faith traditions, or gods, or spiritual practices? – folks like Jews and Muslims. Is the insinuation here

that God will continue to pursue these other sheep, in an effort to make them a part of the one flock, the body of Christ?

And what about those of us who are already a part of the flock but who, for whatever reason, have insisted on climbing down steep cliffs before slipping and falling into the sea? How many of us have stood and shaken our heads in disbelief at the stubbornness or foolishness of our neighbors, only to surround ourselves with labyrinths of wild roses or brambles which snagged our wool and prevented us from moving any further?

If we don't like the implication of being called out as stubborn or daft, then we probably won't appreciate being associated with the lost either. And yet, this is exactly what Jesus calls us in Luke, chapter 15. "Which one of you," he says, "having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

Most of us, I imagine, are quick to envision ourselves there at the side of Jesus, diligently searching for lost sheep. And yet, if this is the case, we are wise to remember that the purpose of the parables, much like that of the gospels, is to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. In other words, Jesus' parables are

intended to challenge and disturb us rather than to offer words of praise and affirmation.

And yet, these parables are still affirming because they remind us of how important we are to God. When the shepherd has found the lost sheep... it doesn't say if he finds the lost sheep. It says "when." The point here is that our God is active and on the move – always in pursuit of these sheep. And when the shepherd has found the lost sheep, "he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

What we see here is a grand party. You know, it doesn't make much sense for a business owner to leave 99 prized possessions behind, particularly when they can move, in search of one that has gone. It makes a lot more sense to stay put and to guard those 99 prized possessions. But, God is willing to take the risk, and for the one lost sheep, this is very, very good news.

So which sheep, then, are we talking about? Are we talking about the oldest sheep, alone in nursing facilities? Are we talking about the least of these? – little Paul and Georgia who were baptized here this morning. Are we talking about the mournful prisoner or the victims of crime? Are we talking about residents of New York City, who woke up today to news once again of a bomb in their city? Are we talking about the sheep in this congregation? The answer, of course, is yes. And God will not rest until we are brought into the fold. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.