

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday it has also been called vocations Sunday when we pray that those who are called to leadership will hear, respond to and be supported in their calls. I'll come back to vocations but let's talk start with shepherds.

Good Shepherd Sunday tends to be a day when urban clergy repeat a load of hastily researched facts and pretend that they know a whole lot more about sheep than we actually do, -In hopes of avoiding that, I have consulted with the few shepherds that I know: So and Pinar Sinopoulos-Lloyd, Noel Moules, and Matthew Humphrey.

Three of our texts today refer to Sheep and Shepherds

Psalm 23, which we sang  
The tender Poem by the romantic poet William Blake -about child and lamb seeing Christ in one another and the Gospel reading where Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd

Because we celebrate this day with different readings in each of the three years of the liturgical calendar, and because it is a theme that is both repeated and recycled biblically, We tend to hear the echoes of other sheep and shepherd passages:

The ram that Abraham finds in the thicket and sacrifices instead of Isaac  
You might remember that the matriarch Rachel was a shepherd  
the shepherds of Ezekeil -leaders who fail to care for their people  
the lost sheep of the parable  
the shepherds who watch their flocks by night  
slaughtered lamb of Revelation

Human relationships with sheep possibly go back some thirteen thousand years; a bond initially nurtured among the rock and sand of ancient Mesopotamia. And images of both gods and kings as shepherds of their people are older than Christianity and older than Judaism

But misunderstanding the sheep-shepherd relationship and then applying it to our relationship with God ends up being not very flattering for either of us.

## **Sheep**

If I said “you are all a bunch of sheep” who would take that as a compliment?

We tend to think that sheep are powerless creatures, needy, easily lead, and unable to think independently. “Wooly” is a word used for someone who is vague, confused, not very smart.

Where we don’t depend on them for meat, milk or textiles sheep can even seem useless.

But my shepherd friends tell me sheep are far from stupid.

They are fast, good climbers, have 320 degree vision, they can recognize voices

*10:27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*

They can identify human and sheep faces from a photo after a year without seeing the individual.

Sheep can solve problems—there are several cases where sheep have figured out how to roll across cattle guards in the road

*Sheep are among the only creatures that can convert the desert plants to forms more available for human use.*

In the ancient near east sheep were a herding family’s source of livelihood and wealth -they were incredibly valuable.

Sheep are brilliantly adapted for their lifestyle: they are herd animals, dessert dwellers, and prey, -as species for whom sticking together is the best form of defense.

Former shepherd and one of my wilderness teachers, So Sinoupolos Lloyd, says we project our fear of conformity onto sheep. But in fact they teach us about the intelligence of the collective, about trust, and community. They also really teach about the gifts of fear and vigilance.

For me that emphasis on nurturing community for the vulnerable really resonates in this Easter season when we read about the early church community in the book of Acts.

So the first common mistake in reading this passage is underestimating sheep.

## Shepherd

The second mistake is overestimating shepherds. The flip side of the dumb sheep is the wise, benevolent shepherd (often in pristine robes and flowing hair) who saves the dim-witted sheep from inevitable doom.

But my shepherd friends say shepherd craft is not about control, power, and dominance.

Despite bishops and their crooks and the imagery of King as shepherd, Shepherding is not a high-status profession. It is often carried out by children. And Noel Moules reminds us A shepherd is a wilderness figure. Often an outsider in terms of mainstream society. The fact that angels appear to shepherds in Luke is shocking not cozy.

Shepherding is primarily about relationship and mutual learning. A shepherd must respect sheep.

During WW2 shepherds of Crete were critical guerrilla resisters because they saw and experienced the land, the terrain through the eyes of the sheep. In being a shepherd, they also were shepherded *by* these animals.

A sheep that does not know and trust the shepherd will not follow the sound of their voice.

In Greek both '*to follow*' and '*to know*', strongly stress the experience of reciprocal relationship. This is a call to all of us to lively mutual relationships between humans and with the more than human world.

It is an interesting thing in the shepherd passage, Jesus does not use the definite article, Jesus doesn't say he is THE (one and only very special) Good Shepherd but a Good Shepherd. So here we are coming back to vocations again. Ours is "a priesthood of all believers."  
each person here has a vocation for leadership in God's church

What if we had that kind of reciprocal trust and mutual learning relationship with place and other beings in our church, in our neighbourhood, in our watershed? How would we care for one another? Who are the thieves and robbers, nations and false shepherds that threaten, consume, commodify and displace?

## Death

In each of the scripture readings, death is very close.

In the Gospel the sheep are caught and scattered by wolves. And the gold standard, the ideal of a good shepherd is one who would die for their sheep.

In Acts, Peter and John are out of jail but still in custody. And in the broader trajectory of Acts, the life of the early church right after Easter is just what the gospel describes—the shepherd has died and the sheep are scattered, struggling to become a flock again.

The psalm, which is the only reading that we hear every year on this Sunday, has three parts: a description of God as shepherd

A description of God as host, provider of radical and abundant hospitality

And in between, because biblically the most important piece goes in the middle, is the valley of the shadow of death and the fear of evil

And this I think, is the most important thing that the psalmist offers to us and to three thousand years of singers and prayers:

Each of us in our own way know the valley of the shadow of death—it might mean sickness, grief, or fear, depression, addiction, loneliness

And this psalm does not tell us that there is no evil, that suffering is not real compared to the good life waiting for us, that bad things only happen to bad people, or that we are only given as much as we can bear.

This psalm tells us only, and absolutely that whatever *our* valley of the shadow is, God is with us. whether we feel it or not, whether we believe it or not, whether we like it or not, God, God who created us and loved us, is there with us.

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for you are with me*

*For you are with me*

If truth be told when it comes to vocations, I think most of us hope that someone *else* will be called, because -like the good shepherd it means knowing what we would die for.

But I pray that each one of us (whether you are thinking I am too busy, too young, too old, too tired, too cynical) listen deeply to how we are called because that vocation, that each of us has, is not just about what we would die for but that we would truly, fearlessly, beautifully LIVE for.

### **Blessing**

May God guide you through the wilderness

and protect you through the storm

may God bring you home rejoicing

at the wonders God has shown you

may God bring you home rejoicing

once again into our doors.