

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.

Aaah, what an idyllic setting. All is calm, all is bright, all of creation is at peace with itself. I think we all would love to abide in that place of constant comfort, hearing the guiding voice of the shepherd, resting in the knowledge that all of our wants and needs will be met, and never feeling alienated or alone or somehow an outsider to the flock to which we belong.

However, in our Gospel lesson, that isn't the setting or dynamic of which Jesus speaks. In the previous few verses, Jesus been speaking of thieves, bandits, strangers and wolves. While he has spoken of a realm of peace, he has acknowledged a reality violence.

So, no, Jesus isn't conjuring a pastoral setting to make us feel warm and fuzzy. His listeners are not at a nice, quiet hillside, peaceful and calm. Our context here is of the religious elite's condemnatory confrontation with Jesus and their questions regarding his authority; to be sure, danger is in the air.

Jesus evokes the image of a shepherd with his sheep ~ an image that was easily understood by his listeners. The shepherd, afterall, feeds the flock, cares for their injuries, and keeps them safe from harm. Sheep respond only to the voice of the one person they trust. Generally, shepherds talk to their sheep all day long, which brings them comfort and helps some from straying too far. The bond between the sheep and shepherd is strong; the bond is unconditional, it is unwavering, and it is intimate.

Not unlike sheep, **we** long and hunger to know and to be known. But forming authentic community is hard work, time consuming, and we can't always be the center of attention – we dole out parts of ourselves in stingy bits and pieces, avoid being vulnerable with each other, hold back our feelings, are afraid to compassionately confront each other, judge each other without mercy, hold grudges, and set impossibly high standards for ourselves and each

other. We have a difficult time trusting each other with our shortcomings and our triumphs.

We project a carefully-crafted mask of what we want others to see, attempting to manage other's impressions of who we might be. And we interpret the masks of others, through filters we've crafted from a lifetime of positive and negative experiences. Our perceptions of others may or may not reflect the true character of the person being evaluated. I would add that our perceptions of our self may or may not reflect our own true character, as well.

As such, we respond too frequently to the voices of our inner critic, our culture, our unrealistic expectations, and perhaps not enough to the voice of our Lord who calls us to accept and love others (and ourselves!) with wild abandon. *{wide arms}*

Jesus's message is clear: he will protect his flock even unto death. Why? Because his knowledge of us is intimate. Because his devotion is unconditional and unwavering. **Because he loves us.**

But what about those who don't feel that they share the same level of intimacy with the Good Shepherd that other members of the flock proclaim? What about those who don't recognize the voice of God in their lives, who feel alone and un-cared for, or who yearn for direction and purpose? And what about those who have heard and responded to the voice of culture, the voices of fear or doubt, or any of the other voices which deceive?

Jesus makes clear that those individuals are not outside of his reach. "I have other sheep," he says, "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."

The unity of God's one flock is not the result of what they believe, or how they behave. Rather, the unity of God's one flock will be manifest when all of God's children fully embrace God's love for them.

We are all beloved of God, we are all cared for, we are all tended to – whether we recognize it or not. As such, no one is "other" in God's eyes: everyone has a place in the Good Shepherd's flock.

The defining characteristic of Jesus's flock is not which worshipping community we attend, the creed we profess, or our participation in any particular group, but rather is defined by the mere fact that we are all loved by

God – with that same wild abandon we are called to emulate to each and every other human being.

Henri Nouwen wrote that when we claim and proclaim the truth of being God's loved ones, we discover within ourselves a desire to reveal to others the reality of their state of loved-ness. He writes, "In the house of God there are many mansions. There is a place for everyone - a unique, special place. Once we deeply trust that we ourselves are precious in God's eyes, we are able to recognize the preciousness of others and their unique places in God's heart."¹

We show up here each week, in part, to remember that Jesus himself, the Good Shepherd, gathers up all of the sheep, the ones who were "already in," and those pushed outside the flock, and loves, heals, and feeds them tenderly.

As faithful followers of Jesus here at St. Peter's, we do our best to provide spiritual, emotional, and social space where all are welcome. The flock is not a closed system. Jesus owns up to having "others" that he cares about too, and remembering that nurtures in us a radical perspective of hospitality. That said, a life and ministry of hospitality, living into the wholeness and unity God desires for the entire created order, is difficult; it tests us, it demands that we risk being truly seen and known, it requires that our masks be removed and our best intentions be overtly acted upon.

We are a people of the resurrection. We are a people shaped by Christ's arms, *open wide* in love and grace. We are called to orient ourselves toward him and help others discern **his** voice in a noisy world. By doing so, not only can we rest in the peace of God (about which we've been talking a great deal this Easter season), but we are messengers of God's peace and unity in a world that urges us to craft masks, build walls, and promote the many voices of our culture which are not of God.

The Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,'² but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to 'love the stranger.'³ In our Gospel reading, Jesus is telling the religious authorities that he will do just that: he will do unto the outliers as he would do unto a member of his own flock ~ and he did ... on the cross with arms open wide.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*

² Leviticus 19:18

³ Rachel Farbiarz, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/treatment-of-the-stranger/>