

When Nigel asked me to fill in for him the first thing I did is look up the lessons for today. I discovered I'd drawn what is known in the preaching trade as "Sheep Sunday" – one of at least two Sundays in the lectionary where the theme of God as our shepherd and we are the sheep is reflected in the readings, today in the Epistle, the Psalm and the Gospel reading. The trick for me as the preacher on Sheep Sunday is trying to find a fresh approach for these lessons most familiar to you, particularly the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The immediate solution— Take a field trip! I've lived in cities all my life until we moved to Whidbey Island 2 years ago. All I knew about sheep and shepherds I'd learned out of Bible commentaries. So off I went to the beautiful farm of Chris and Jerry Lubinski to find out about real shepherds and see real sheep. I went with 2 major questions. See if my field trip questions and answers work for you: Do humans really fit the sheep metaphor? Does my image/your image and experience of God really fit the shepherd metaphor?

This is what I saw on my field trip: There were 2 dozen Shetland sheep in the pasture. They were mildly curious as Chris and Jerry and I walked up to the fence, but they didn't come near because I was a stranger. Chris thought they didn't recognize her with her sunhat on, not until she spoke and they heard her voice did they begin to come nearer, but still not close enough to touch or pet. Sheep are not cuddly like the family dog; they don't want to be petted. They soon went back to grazing, spread out in the pasture, some just focused on eating what was in front of them. Some, however, observed what their neighbor was eating, and found it more appealing, so there was some nudging going on as more appetizing entrees of pasture were claimed.

Sheep tend to move as a group. When one of them starts to run somewhere the others seem to follow. Sheep aren't very bright, and their independent streak often gets them into trouble. As I demonstrate this fact, one little brown sheep crawled under a low spot in the fence. As soon as she got to the next field, she turned around to look back at the others, all of whom seemed not to have noticed her brilliant escape, so she went back under the fence in the same place. Jerry immediately got his tools and fixed the escape route. The herd, flock had been moved to a new pasture the day before, and for the transfer Chris and Jerry blocked off the short route from one pasture to the next. Chris stood by the open gate to the new pasture and most of the herd moved as a group into the new pasture. Except for three who wandered around the blockade and went off down the road. Chris went after them, calling to them, it took awhile she said, but finally when they realized a fence separated them from the others they followed Chris into the new pasture. We've all watched enough Nature shows to know that predators pick off those who get separated from the herd, so keeping the sheep together is important for their safety. Sheep can't defend themselves. They need protection, and guidance. Apart from the grazing pastures Chris and Jerry have a sheepfold, just like in the gospel lesson. The sheepfold consists of protected pens connected to the barn where the lambs are born, or the sheering takes place, or they get vaccinated. Sheep don't like to be handled— sheered or tended to, so there is a chute where the sheep have to go through single file to get into or out of the sheep fold, and where they can be held up one at a time for needed attention.

What I knew about shepherds from books was also pretty much confirmed by what I saw. But there was one major surprise. Besides Chris and Jerry as shepherds, there is another who shares the shepherding responsibilities with them, and it is not a sheep dog as I would have guessed. It is a white and grey donkey named Guinevere who lives with the sheep out in the pasture. Guinevere's jobs include being the braying morning alarm clock that says it's time to eat, the

braying announcer of danger if a coyote comes near, and the braying announcer of "Follow the Leader Donkey" drills to test the sheep in their following skills. Sheep naturally follow other sheep, but they have to learn to follow ones with proper authority, shepherds. Guinevere conducts these drills periodically to test the sheep on following her to the barn to safety. Guinevere may even think she's really the one in charge, because she is quite territorial about the sheep she guards. Many who raise sheep use donkeys to help care for sheep. You'd have to get past a big stubborn donkey to get to the sheep. Guinevere the Donkey Shepherd was the surprise of my field trip to experience real sheep and shepherds.

The biblical metaphor of God as Shepherd and God's People as Sheep is probably the most easily understood of all the biblical metaphors. The Bible is packed with figurative illustrations: allegory, parable, proverbs, poetry, maxims, similes, and metaphors – so much figurative language which cannot be understood at a literal level. It is all this figurative language in the Bible that makes the Bible so difficult to understand, impossible to understand, at the intellectual level alone. But the biblical shepherd sheep imagery seems to get through to the deeper parts where it can be apprehended at the soul level. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is certainly the most familiar even for those who have not read the Bible. "The Lord is my shepherd" implies the psalmist, and then the reader, recognizes himself/herself as a sheep. Knowing what you know about sheep as the classic biblical metaphor for us, and the Lord as our shepherd, let's look at the very familiar KJV version. Please turn to page 476 of the Book of Common Prayer, down toward the bottom of the page. You see it is in the Burial office for very good reason. It is most commonly used in funerals because it offers comfort and security in the midst of grief and suffering. Look for the other metaphors as I take you through this most beloved part of scripture.

In the midst of crises, this psalm is a prayer of trust. *The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want.* In the midst of extreme vulnerability, this psalm expresses faith. In the midst of crises the Lord provides everything I need. *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; The Lord **makes** me stop, not just slow down, but makes me immovable in order to be nourished and replenished. He leadeth me beside the still waters. --- He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake* This Shepherd leads me for his sake as well as mine; he restores me because that is his character, maybe even his reputation depends on it. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; This dark valley is not just about our physical death, but all the things that threaten to kill us emotionally and spiritually and physically – the crises of life that deaden or diminish us to less than whole human beings God created us to be. thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. The Shepherd's rod corrects me, disciplines me. The Shepherd's staff sets boundaries of security that save me, comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Being seated at a table in the presence of our enemies is surely a crisis. Within the Lord's hospitable preparation of this table we are safe to be present with our enemies, but that doesn't necessarily mean the enemies are seated at the table with us. Because it is the Lord's table we can get past our fears and maybe even have enough courage to confront these enemies that would do us harm, these enemies of addiction, of disease, of sins – all the evils that harm us. Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. At this table of the Lord we are drenched with healing empowering oil, and our thirst for wholeness is quenched by a cup that is not merely adequate but overflows. Surely goodness and mercy, shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

We claim with faith, not simply intellectual assent or head knowledge, we claim with trust the promise of God's presence in the midst of crises. Nowhere in this psalm is there a hint of naïve trust or blind faith, but rather a trust fully aware of the realities of evil and suffering. This psalm doesn't promise that evils are eliminated or that suffering is eradicated. Yet we will sit in the presence of our enemies with confidence, knowing the goodness and mercy of the Lord's presence with us.

Some people opt out of this kind of faith. If God can't or won't eradicate my suffering why bother? All the sermons and explanations in the world will not convince one who does not know at some level deeper than the head level, but at the heart, the soul, the gut level of sheer need beyond what they themselves can provide. The presence of the Lord as Shepherd is all the faith the sheep needs.

Instead of just automatically saying Amen at the end of this sermon, I invite you to respond first by saying silently, "The Lord is my shepherd." Are you a sheep that needs a shepherd? Ask yourself if you do trust that the Lord is your shepherd, or, if you want the Lord to be your shepherd. And if you can say the Lord is my shepherd with honesty, or with the hope that it is true, then say out loud, not as a herd moving all at once, but as an individual sheep of this flock, say so out loud.