

Samuel J. Smith
Church of the Transfiguration, Manhattan, NY

May 3, 2009

Texts: Psalm 23; Acts 4:23-37; 1 John 3:1-8; John 10: 11-16

Subject: Daring to trust God to lead us

Title: Learning to Be Sheep

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.” In the name of our God who creates, redeems, and sustains us. **Amen**

For me, this is a time of transitions. I am finishing my seminary career—graduation is a little over two weeks away. That event will also bring to a close my time here with you. I am grateful for the two years I have spent among you here at The Little Church Around the Corner. I have learned a lot here, and know that I will carry all of you into my future ministry. Thank you for the generosity you have shown me.

Of course, I am also looking toward priesthood. My ordination to the transitional diaconate will be on June 20. Right now I am deep into the process of looking for a job, trying to discern where God is calling me next. It’s a little scary; there are so many possibilities, so many ways I could turn. If there were ever a time to look for guidance—for a shepherd to lead me—this is it, I think. So I turn to the scriptures today to ask, where should I go? Who should I listen to? How can I discern the guiding hand of the good shepherd in my life?

The lectionary turns our attention toward Christ the shepherd each year at this time. The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year we hear a part of this 10th chapter of the gospel of John, where Jesus again and again refers to himself using this powerful metaphor. Talk of shepherds and sheep had particular relevance for the people of Jesus’ place and time, but most of us know little about this nomadic way of life. So each year we are left to puzzle a bit about what it means to be sheep.

Recently, in an effort to educate myself on the subject, I turned to a favorite source of inspiration for sermon writing: the cinema. I watched *Babe*, the 1995 movie about the little pig who dares to do the work of a sheepdog.

And what did I learn about sheep? Well, I learned that all the barnyard animals in the movie seem to agree on only one thing: Sheep are stupid. They can’t take care of themselves. As Rex, the old sheepdog says, sheep are “too afraid and stupid to save their own skins.”

When the sheep finally speak for themselves, we learn that they actually aren’t stupid. Maybe they’re just a little reticent to act—the term we use for that is sheepish, right? And they do seem to think and act as a group. When Babe gets to know them, and treats them with respect, he learns that they are really just misunderstood. The sheep respond to Babe’s respectful interaction, and willingly cooperate with him. Much to everyone’s surprise, Babe wins the big sheepdog trial with a perfect score, proving that he can indeed be a good sheepdog, even if he is a pig.

I admit that this is a very unlikely scenario; a nice story, but probably not a very reliable picture of sheep—or of pigs, for that matter. In the end I wasn’t sure if that movie provided any helpful

information to me on the subject. So I began to think where else I might turn for information on sheep.

As some of you know, my partner Don used to work at an outdoor living history museum in Indiana. His office overlooked the sheep pasture, so I asked what he knew on the subject. He confirmed that sheep are not the smartest animals on the farm. Don explained to me that when the shepherders at the museum want to move a ewe from one field to another, their usual method is to take one of her lambs and hold it in front of her face as they walk from place to place. But they must be careful to keep the lamb at her eye level—sheep are apparently anatomically incapable of looking up, and if they get the lamb above her head where she can't see it, it is for her as if the lamb just disappeared. She will simply stop right where she is, and will go no further.

Interestingly, in General Seminary's Chapel right here at 9th Avenue and 20th Street (which is called the Chapel of the Good Shepherd) there is centered above the altar a sculpture of Jesus the Shepherd. He cradles a small lamb in his arms. Another sheep is wrapped around his legs, and she gazes up at him intently. With Don's help, I now realize that this statue, while beautiful, is wholly inaccurate, since sheep can't look up. Oh well...

I next recalled a place that is filled with images of sheep. The office of one of the Associate Rectors in my home parish in Indianapolis is filled with sheep pictures, sheep statuettes, sheep magnets, and many, many stuffed sheep. I imagine that on some Good Shepherd Sunday many years past, she talked about her love of these woolly creatures, and over the years parishioners have overwhelmed her with sheep. Without exception, all these sheep are snow white and fluffy. But if you have been on a farm you know that the truth of sheep is that a lamb's wool gets very dirty. In actuality, sheep are often grey, smelly creatures.

All of this brings me to the conclusion that it is not particularly flattering to be compared to a sheep. As we look for ourselves in today's lessons it's pretty clear that we are the dirty, stinky, stupid animals. Luckily, these passages don't focus so much on us, the sheep, but instead focus on the shepherd—and in this year's passages, on the threats that the good shepherd must fend off.

Isn't it uncanny how dead-on the lectionary can be? Here, in a time when we feel so under threat—by an economy out of whack, by the ongoing threat of terrorism, and this week especially by the prospect of a deadly flu pandemic—at a time like this, the gospel we read seems to address those threats directly.

This portion of John's discourse on the good shepherd refers to the wolf coming in sight and the bad shepherd (the hired hand) running away. Biblical scholars link this reference to the prior chapter, where Jesus heals the blind man and is questioned by the Pharisees. The Pharisees are like the hired hand: They do not care about the people, and they will abandon them when times get rough.

It is easy to draw a parallel here to those in the business world today who offered (and took) easy money, without realizing the implications of their actions. We trusted them, didn't we? We wanted to believe that they had our interests at heart. But when things began to collapse, it seems that, just like the hired hand, they ran away. We thought they were working for us, but they had their own interests in mind.

Jesus goes on to remind us that he, the good shepherd, knows us and will not abandon us. And then the metaphor continues as Jesus uses this idea to refer to the crucifixion and resurrection: “I lay down my life in order to take it up again.”

Why does the writer of John’s gospel present these confusing images? Well, as one author says,

The whole Gospel of John is nothing if not a piling up of metaphors.... How else are we to convey truth about God? What single image, what single word could suffice? Plain speech is fine as far as it goes—but it can’t go far enough to ‘explain’ God.¹

The writer of John believes in the power of the word—remember this Gospel’s opening: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” He uses poetic words to paint a vivid picture of Jesus our caregiver. If we want to understand who this Jesus is, we must dive into the metaphors.

What would it mean to take on the role of a sheep—to trust that God in Christ will protect us from threats and lead us to the right place? Certainly we have to be willing to follow. One reason that the relationship between a shepherd and her sheep works is because the sheep are willing to be led – they give up any desire to control where they go, trusting that the shepherd knows what’s best for them.

But in today’s world, letting someone or something else take control over us is seen as weakness. We often believe we must be self-aware, self-sufficient, self-actualizing—we want to put ourselves at the center, to control our own destiny. Yet the irony is that many of us see ourselves as inadequate, unimportant, incapable.

Recently in one of my classes we had an honest conversation about our demons—those things that strike fear in us. In this group of smart, highly-educated folks, most of whom have been through an exhaustive discernment process for vocation in the church and have been affirmed as outstanding candidates for ordained ministry, almost every one of us confessed that our demons took the form of fear of inadequacy—worry that we will be discovered as frauds, not fulfilling what others expect of us.

Of course this is not a fear unique to seminarians. Listen to these words from author and theologian Dean Brackley:

Modern society produces fragile egos. Consumerism makes us feel inadequate for the way we look, how much we weigh, or how old we are, because we don’t measure up to the ideals promoted by advertising and multiplied by peer pressure.... We have to replace these bad-news lies with the good news that we are acceptable and accepted, and this doesn’t depend on measuring up to anything. If we’re not okay, well, that’s okay.²

Most of us are sure that we are dirty smelly creatures, and that, at any moment, everyone is going to realize this truth. We know deep within that we are not up to par.

¹ Jaime Clark-Soles, “Commentary,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx#>

² Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 32.

That leaves us with a real problem, doesn't it? We have determined that, to be successful, we must take care of ourselves—and yet we are sure that we aren't up to the job.

Well, here's the good news, folks: Today's reading reminds us that we can trust God to take care of us. The image of Jesus as the good shepherd embodies for us the way that God willingly provides for us. If we will give up our need to be in control, God promises to lead us along the right pathways.

Easier said than done, right? Just like those sheep back in Indiana, we often lose sight of Jesus, and stop in our tracks. But the good shepherd is always there, willing to wait until we catch sight of him again, and to continue leading us along.

How does Jesus shepherd us? Well, one way is through Christian community—the Church. We as the church are called to be shepherds to the world—to be the eyes, arms, legs, and heart of Christ.

You have been my shepherd along the path to holy orders, as you have embodied Christ for me with your prayers and support. You tend the flock in your collaboration with Ecclesia Ministries, our Christian presence for the homeless in Madison Square Park, and in the clothes you donate to St. Martin's Closet, the seminary-run program for people in need. And certainly, the Little Church itself has embodied the Shepherd for years as a steadfast witness to the faith right here in the middle of an ever-changing and often difficult city.

And each time we come to this altar for Holy Communion Christ is embodied in us. As we partake of the living metaphor of bread and wine, it mysteriously and miraculously becomes the flesh and blood of Christ in our very beings. Here at this table we are strengthened to take on the work of the Shepherd.

Even as we are all sheep, God uses each of us as embodiments of the Shepherd. We must honor this gift of trust and help heal the world. We must dare to take responsibility to care for others as Christ cares of us—to be like the Shepherd in all we do, even though we know we are merely sheep.

But here's the best news of all: Like that amazing pig Babe understood the sheep, God understands and respects us, just as we are. God loves us. God sees the real you and the real me, and knows that we aren't the smelly, dirty, stupid animals we imagine. God sees that we are actually fluffy, sweet-smelling, lovable creatures—after all, remember that we are made in God's image. AMEN.