

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER ~ 30 April 2023

### The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

We are now half-way through the Easter season. It is not surprising, but it is delightful that the Church has chosen the images of sheep and the good shepherd as the theme for this Sunday's Liturgy of the Word. These images are deeply embedded in both the Old Testament and the New



Testament. Indeed, the word "sheep" is used 220 times, "lamb" is used 200 times, and "shepherd" is used 118 times. Knowing the importance of repetition as a key to interpreting Scripture, we have good reason to believe that Jesus knew his Scriptures very well! Knowing that there are many, many wisdoms permeating the images, let us choose three for our reflection today: knowing, compassion, and voice.

**Knowing** – Jesus tells us that, as the good shepherd, "I know my own" (Jn 10:10). Recent studies carried out by scientists at the Babraham Institute in Cambridge in

England (led by Jenny Norton, a neuroscientist) give us new insights into knowing sheep. These studies show that sheep possess a sharp sense of individuality and can recognize the faces of people and other sheep for at least two years. They react to facial expressions, prefer a smile to a grimace, mourn absent individuals, and will show visible signs of depression. Ewes, in particular, are more sensitive to the faces of other sheep, especially lamb faces – they will instantly recognize the needs of the lamb by looking at its face, allowing them to raise lambs more positively. Sheep have a good memory and a good learning capacity and are far more emotionally intelligent than we thought. They have high levels of social intelligence, relying on other members of the herd to provide protection for each other. Indeed, sheep have a 'sense of self' with individual characters and personalities.

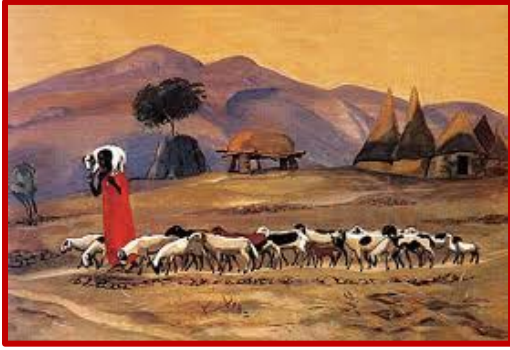
Shepherding is among the oldest occupations, beginning some 5,000 years ago and existing in all parts of the world. Unlike farmers, shepherds had to move constantly from one pasture to another. Therefore, they lived apart from society, being largely nomadic. It was mainly a job of solitary males without children. Their duty was to keep their flock intact, protect it from predators, and guide it to market areas in time for shearing. They were often wage earners, being paid to watch the sheep of others, and were often the younger sons of farming peasants who did not inherit any land. Although essential to the life and economy of the people, shepherds were poor, smelled of sheep, and were not welcomed in ordinary society.

Yet Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all used the metaphor of the shepherd to image God and those who would be godlike in their actions. This in itself is an implicit invitation to inclusion and a reminder that being godlike is not about being powerful, dominant, privileged, and controlling. On many occasions in the Old Testament, God is compared to a shepherd. We heard from the best known of all psalms (sung in our Liturgy today), "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake" (Ps 23:1-3). In a beautiful chapter in Ezekiel, God says twice "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says



**Jesus the Good Shepherd,**  
Amiens Cathedral. [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

### ***The Good Shepherd, Jesus MAFA***



the Lord God" (Ezek 34:15, 31). And in John 10, Jesus is imaged as the shepherd – indeed, he tells us twice, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I am the good shepherd" (Jn 10:10, 14).

All the major figures of the Scriptures of these three religions insist that the leaders of the people must lead as shepherds. The patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, the twelve tribes, the prophet Moses, David, and Amos were real shepherds. Jacob met his future wife Rachel at a well when she was shepherd for her father's sheep and where he impressed her by ensuring that her sheep were given water (see Genesis 29). Moses received his call to become leader of the people when he was tending the sheep of his father-in-law and saw the burning bush on Mount Horeb (see Exodus 3). David was named by Samuel to become the second king of Israel – David had to be called from his shepherding duties after his six brothers were rejected (see 1 Sam 16:13-15). In Islam, referring to himself, Moses, Abraham, and Jesus, Mohammed says, "There was no prophet who was not a shepherd."

In our Christian tradition, the word "pastor" (the Latin word for "shepherd") has become strongly identified with ministry. Ordained leaders in Christian denominations are almost all called pastors (including Roman Catholic priests). Pastoral care and pastoral ministry are terms used to describe ministry in hospitals, long term care facilities, parishes, prisons, universities, schools, etc. Indeed, the term is now used for such ministries of care and compassion outside the religious context. It is often an expectation outlined in accreditation surveys for hospitals and universities with no links to any religious groups – and, more significantly, an expectation of the persons being served in such places.

On a number of occasions, speaking to bishops and priests and to Christian managers, Pope Francis has told them explicitly, "Jesus knows how to go in front of the flock to show the way, knows how to stay among them to see what is happening there, and knows how to stay behind, to make sure that no one loses contact – you must be shepherds with the smell of sheep." Muhammad says, "All of you are shepherds and every one of you is responsible for his herd. A leader is a shepherd, a man is the shepherd over his family, and a woman is the shepherd over her husband's house and his children. So all of you are shepherds, and every one of you is responsible for his herd."

**Compassion** – In today's reading from John, Jesus uses the image of the sheep and the shepherd to explain why he has come, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." How do ministers as shepherds, as pastoral ministries, follow that promise of Jesus? They do so (as Harold Rowdon summarizes succinctly) by "protecting, tending to needs, strengthening the weak, encouraging, feeding the flock, making provision, shielding, refreshing, restoring, leading by example to move people on in their pursuit of holiness, comforting, guiding." Matthew says clearly that being a shepherd has one quality above all others, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36). The image from Isaiah speaks profoundly to compassion, "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" (Is 40.11).



**Christ as the Good Shepherd,**  
**Lucas Cranach**

The use of images of the lambs and ewes highlights that this compassion is for humans and for



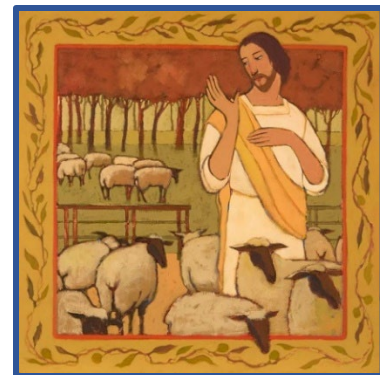
all Earth beings. We sometimes forget that, over time, we have domesticated sheep and conditioned them to depend on us humans for their safety and care. We have violated their trust as we now treat these domesticated animals badly in the interest of profitability, the “bottom line.” While the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 assumed that we would eat only fruit and vegetables, we have moved far from that vision. Norman Wirzba (quoted in Margaret Daly-Denton’s *John: An Earth Bible Commentary*) warns us that, if we are to continue to eat animals, we must respect them and give thanks to God

for the gift of their life that nourishes ours, “For this condition to be met, it is critical that these animals be accorded the attention and care that reflects God’s own self-giving care for creation. True animal husbandry – patterned after God the Good Shepherd – the sort that grows out of a caring bond between person and animal can be a suitable context for the eating of meat.”

**Voice** – Perhaps the most moving dimension of today’s reading is found in the words, “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers” (Jn 10:3-5). The sheep know the voice of their shepherd. The Cambridge study I mentioned earlier gives credence to these words. The sheep do know the voice of their shepherd, trust their shepherd, and reject the trickery of the thieves and bandits whose voices they do not know.

Later in the passage from John 10, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (Jn 10:14-15). Remember that “my own” includes you and me, every Earth being, Earth herself, and the entire cosmos. Can you even imagine more intimate words: “I know my own and my own know me”? Is there any simpler and more complete way to describe the sacred communion of all creation?

The shepherd knows the sheep, and the sheep know the shepherd. Being known to the other and being called by name means that we are in a relationship – the knowing must be and is mutual. As the liturgist, Gail Ramshaw, says, “Jesus’ call to us is grounded in his desire for a relationship with us, to know us and to be known by us. He expects us to engage in discernment, to ask questions, to be wise in the ways that we follow him.” Psalm 95 calls us to trust that God knows us and calls us by name, “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!” (Ps 95:7). When you listen to and truly hear God’s voice, what is the name by which God calls you?



**Other Sheep**  
**Kathleen Peterson**

Steve Garnaas-Holmes has written poignantly to God’s calling us by name:

I bet God doesn’t call you Robert or Elizabeth.  
The Beloved has a name for you  
no one else has given you,



a name no one else has. No one.  
 Better than a nickname,  
 or even a heartfelt term of endearment.  
 The name of your soul,  
 declared to the universe in the language of mystery,  
 pronounceable only by God.  
 When you pray, it is for that name you are listening.  
 When God speaks your name,  
 it is as when God says "Let there be light."  
 It is the name of who you alone are created to be,  
 the name by which God knows you,  
 calls you into life.  
 Listen for the silence in which that name is spoken.  
 (It takes time; it's a deep and wide silence.)  
 Listen for that name.  
 Let the one who alone calls you by name lead you out.



**Jesus as shepherd with the lost sheep, Anon**

In our hearts this week, let us be comforted by knowing that God knows us and we know God. Let us rejoice in God's compassion for us, inviting us to compassion for one another, human and other-than-human. Let us thank God for sheep and for shepherds and for all that they teach us. Let us rejoice in our own name and thank our God who calls us by our name! "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."



**Jesus with lamb, St Paul's,  
 Halifax, Nova Scotia**