

To Be Known
John 10.10-18
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Easter 4B
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What does it look like to be in a fold, to be part of a flock?

(A first friend.)

In the very first week of my very first year at Samford University, the resident advisors of my dormitory worked hard to foster relationships between the girls living in each section of each hall. We were the last group to enter Samford and live in an un-air-conditioned freshman dorm, so the bonding was immediate in our group attempts to position box fans and oscillating fans for maximum cooling effect.

Within a few days, a little birdie told me that a freshman boy from my hometown was not off to the same good start as the girls of West Vail. So I grabbed the two girls I already knew, and we made a point to find this lost boy in the cafeteria at dinner. Because freshmen in their first week were all still eating in the cafeteria, found him we did. Then the four of us attended all of the freshmen orientation social events together and walked the campus the day before classes started so we would know where we were going the next day without looking lost. Within a couple of weeks we were each heading off in directions that would set the course of the next four years, but it was those early days of connection that gave us all the courage to stick with it and trust we would be alright.

(A second friend.)

In my first weeks home with a newborn baby, I was drowning. Turner was born early due to some health issues I was having in that last trimester, and he was little. Weighing only 4 pounds 11 ounces on the day we left the hospital for home, Nathan and I were extremely protective of this tiny child who was now our responsibility. Once our visiting families were gone and Nathan's short time off from work was over, I was alone in a too quiet house with a still tiny baby who didn't sleep well and wanted constant physical contact. There were days when I absolutely didn't know how I would ever do anything but take care of him, and even on those days I wasn't convinced I knew enough to care for the small newborn in my arms.

Within those first weeks, maybe it was in the second month, another new mom asked if she could come by. She brought a quiche. We sat and talked for a while before my baby was fussy and the visit was obviously over. Her visits grew in frequency and duration. At some point we went for a walk in the park and then a walk through the neighborhood. With each outing the walks got longer and the parenting became second-nature; a new normal was established, and I learned to trust my instincts and ability.

(A third friend.)

I arrived with the children, my mother, and my aunt in New Orleans on Sunday, November 2, 2013. Nathan stayed behind in Richmond to finish work and close our house there. We stayed at the Hampton Inn on St. Charles and woke up that Monday to a new city, a new time zone, and new school uniforms. Not knowing anything about the school, we made lunches for the kids from the breakfast bar at the hotel. Less than 24 hours upon arrival in the city, the kids were off to pre-k and 2nd grade while I went to walk through our rental house for the very first time.

Once my family was gone but before Nathan had arrived, I was sitting in the house surrounded by boxes. Towers and towers of boxes. We had really done this. We had really left the community and work and home that we had built for over a decade to follow the undeniable, nagging sense of God's call to this city and this church for our entire family. I sat in that undecorated space, staring at boxes, when a friend-of-a-friend called and asked if she could bring me coffee. Blessed are the coffee bringers. Surely that is as good a love language as any.

I'd made a point to rapidly unpack the children's rooms first so they could have as much a sense of normalcy as possible. And so we ended up sitting in Julia's room for most of our visit because it was largely unpacked and felt cozy. This friend-of-a-friend, rapidly becoming my own friend, assured me we'd found a great space to live when you considered what's available in the rental market. And she assured me that we would find our way around and figure things out in no time at all. And as we sat and talked through the afternoon, she assured me my voice was the one that needed to be heard in this exact place at this exact time. And she told me how glad she was that I was here.

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We need each other. Life is complicated and messy. We get lost and we get scared. We wander off and get stuck alone. And when we remain alone, it is almost inevitable that fear and danger creep in. When we are stuck and alone, false narratives start playing in our head on repeat. We begin to forget who we really are and forget how much our lives matter. All we like sheep have gone astray.

Whether you notice or not, we come back to some version of the Jesus as Good Shepherd passage each year in the weeks of Easter. The sheep/human comparison is one we know well. Maybe too well. It gets exaggerated and overused, so we begin to ignore the metaphor. Sheep are mind-less, the shepherd is mind-full. We are like sheep. We need a shepherd. We get it.

"Sheep are the most frequently mentioned animal in the Bible, with nearly four hundred references if we include references to flocks. Additionally, the figure of the shepherd

receives approximately one hundred references.”¹ Even if we are not students of scripture, the metaphor is well-known in other forms of literature. As is always the challenge with a familiar image, we can miss the power of the message. We must ask today what new thing we might see and hear in John 10.

As I have studied these verses, this time I am drawn less to the details of John’s gospel and more to the metaphor of sheep and shepherd. There’s a theme that is steady throughout scripture that we miss, we underestimate, we overlook, or we flat ignore: God wants a people. For decades now the evangelical tradition has taught that Jesus wants an individual, personal relationship with each and every person sitting in this room. The offer of relationship with Jesus is like a gift handed to us waiting to be unwrapped. We have sung the songs for verse after verse of personal choice, personal following, personal decision and personal journey.

And so we have gathered for decades as hundreds of thousands of autonomous, highly individuated Christ-followers. And really, there can be no such thing. *Who will be first in your kingdom*, the disciples asked him. And he surely rolled his eyes all the way back in his head as the community of followers physically standing in front of him did not understand that they belonged to each other just as much as they belonged to God, and there can be no first in that kind of faith circle.

God doesn’t want to pick who’s first, God wants a people. This journey of faith is not the individual ticket punch for eternal life as so many of us were told. We are being invited into a fold, a community, a way of living and being together. A way of knowing and being known that is intimate, honest, protective, life-giving. As I have read and re-read the text for today, I am struck most by the significance of gathering and knowing that happens between shepherd and flock. *I know them and they know me*.

Dr. Jaqui Lewis writes, “In this Eastertide, here is what love looks like to me: Jesus lays down his life for the sheep. For all of the sheep. For all of the people. This is about relationship and intimacy. Between God and Jesus, and among God’s people. I believe there are no outsiders in the Reign of God. Jesus leads the way to abundant life because he is the life. For all of the sheep. All of the sheep hear Jesus’ voice and recognize it. It is spoken in the ethic of love. It is spoken in acts of justice and compassion. It is spoken in healing and restoration. It is spoken in connection and community. It is spoken in forgiveness and reconciliation.”²

God gathers us together in all kinds of flocks and instructs: Don’t be anxious about who gets included in this fold or whether or not I have other folds beyond what you can see, just know my voice and my love. God is gathering and blessing in all kinds of ways, and

¹ *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, pp. 782-785, “SHEEP, SHEPHERD”

² <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/on-scripture-the-bible/exhaling-judgment-a-personal-journey-toward-radical-welcome-john-1011-18/>

God's flock is expansive. God is watching and tending right here and over there and way out there. Our task is to stick together and listen for the shepherd's voice.

When we wonder how that metaphor comes alive to us now, we don't have to scratch our heads as though we're figuring out some difficult mathematical equation for the first time. Most of us who grew up in the church did not understand ourselves to be part of a people in the way that John describes. If you still think of yourself as a lone, wandering sheep and want to know how you might ever imagine being connected to all the others, start listening to the story of your own life. Think of the times when you have been present to others and others have been present to you. When have you been pulled out of isolation and into community? When have you sensed a closeness and comfort that you desperately needed? This is the work of the Good Shepherd and the work of the Church—loving, gathering, comforting, guarding, calling out, drawing back into community, blessing, hearing, seeing, knowing. And if you have never experienced this kind of love, join us as we seek to love each other right here.

Alex Evans note of our John 10 text, "[T]hese words convey something that remains so hard to grasp: we may live sophisticated lives in the midst of the city, but God, the Living Lord, cares for our needs. We maintain complex, often confusing days—going to work, juggling various pressures, worrying about the flu, fretting about the economy, reading about turmoil in...the world, but the promise affirms—'I am the good shepherd.' The promise holds—the Lord provides for us, even through the darkest valley, even surrounded by wolves and other threats, even overwhelmed with changes and challenges.

We often find ourselves afraid and lost. We are often more like a jittery lamb than we want to admit. The image of the good shepherd proves nice and poetic. But it remains much more than that because we are too often more like fearful sheep, not making the best decisions, getting lost, needing rescue. And God tends to us, stays with us, cares, guides, seeks us, saves us.

In fact, this is what the whole biblical story is about—God's people getting lost and then rescued by God, the good Shepherd. This is the theme of Genesis and Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It remains the theme of Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel and the books of Kings. It is the overarching theme of Holy Scripture. **The people of God are more like lost sheep than the sophisticated co-creators with God that we like to think we are.** We maintain more in common with the frantic and needy and unaffectionate lamb than the loyal, trusted servants that we want to be. God keeps caring for us, seeking us out, enfolding us in love and peace, carrying us to new life, not leaving us on our own. That does not mean that everything promises to be smooth and easy—in fact it will not be that way. But whatever happens, no matter what we deal with, no matter the magnitude of issues and challenges, heartache and setback—[God sees us and knows us.] God shepherds us! This is the good news."³

May we believe this good news today. Amen.

³ <http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=50>