

How We Shepherd
John 10.11-18 and Psalm 23
April 22, 2018
Easter 4B

Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott with Mary Jo Devlin, LCSW
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Let's play in poetry today. Let's soak in metaphor just as the soil around us is soaking in that good Spring rain. Let's hear the invitation of imagery, welcoming us into the work of God. This 4th Sunday of Easter is referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday, and the lectionary gifts us with these beautiful, familiar passages of scripture pointing to a shepherding God and shepherding Christ.

I'm drawn to the timing this year of Earth Day falling on Good Shepherd Sunday as I think about the imagery of our Divine Shepherd walking the rolling hills, guiding sheep safely along the land, knowing them by name, accounting for each one. The imagery from the psalmist: lying down in green pastures, resting beside still waters, walking right paths and darkest valley.

We know from Genesis 1 that the created, physical world bears the fingerprints of God, and the breath trails of a hovering Spirit who breathed the world into being with a holy wind and divine word. If all of the world is called GOOD by God. And if scripture tells us God is like a shepherd, caring for the good world and its very good people. And if scripture draws a picture for us of Jesus as teaching shepherd to his disciples, showing them the way of this work. Then it seems to me we are being invited into this poetry. We are being invited into the metaphor as a way of living.

We love and are tremendously grateful for God as our shepherd. God leading us to still waters for drink and rest and reinvigoration. God being present to us in the darkest valleys, God welcoming us to table and anointing us with a blessing of oil. We give thanks for this comforting, lush, attentive image of a God who cares and loves and sees and tends to our wounds just as God welcomes us to wholeness and community. But that same God also welcomes us into likeness, which means we are also to live out the work and ways of God.

If God is our shepherd and we are called to live into the likeness of our God, then how are we also called to shepherding work? This is our guiding question today. Wendell Berry writes, "The Gospels...stand at the opening of a mystery in which our lives are

deeply, dangerously, and inescapably involved.”¹ That certainly sounds like the work of a shepherd—rod and staff at the ready, prepared for dangerous work. Let’s step into the mystery and the danger, the balance of being comforted and comforting, being shepherded and shepherding.

We can explore this metaphor in any number of ways, but let’s keep it simple because once we hear the implications of the work, we can apply the invitation to all the sheepfolds of our whole world.

And considering our whole world is where I want to stand for a little while. I can’t preach on the goodness of this earth and the care it needs without holding the Bible in one hand and Wendell Berry’s words in the other. Berry writes:

“To be convinced of the sanctity of the world, and to be mindful of a human vocation to responsible membership in such a world, must always have been a burden. But it is a burden that falls with greatest weight on us humans of the industrial age who have been and are, by any measure, the humans most guilty of desecrating the world and of destroying creation. And we ought to be a little terrified to realize that, for the most part and at least for the time being, we are helplessly guilty...We all are now complicit in the murder of creation. We certainly do know how to apply better measures to our conduct and our work. We know how to do far better than we are doing. But we don’t know how to extricate ourselves from our complicity very surely or very soon.

How could we live without degrading our soils, slaughtering our forests, polluting our streams, poisoning the air and the rain?...How could we live without endangering species, including our own? How could we live without the war economy and the holocaust of the fossil fuels? To the offer of more abundant life, we have chosen to respond with the economics of extinction.

If we take the Gospels seriously, we are left, in our dire predicament, facing an utterly humbling question: How must we live and work so as to not be estranged from God’s presence in His work and in all His creatures? The answer, we may say, is given in Jesus’ teaching about love.”²

To care for the earth and work for its healing and wholeness is holy work. I fear we in the church don’t get that. We do not understand the gravity of the devastation. We do not understand our complicity in harming the good world God breathed into being

¹ *Holy Ground, "A Limitless Reality"*, Wendell Berry, p. 48

² *Holy Ground, "A Limitless Reality"*, Wendell Berry, pp. 54-55

and gave to us to protect. We do not understand that we are called to work for the healing of the physical earth just as we are called to work for the healing of our neighbors and the healing of ourselves. God's shalom—that deep peace and comprehensive flourishing of all things and all people—is for the full scope of creation. We are invited into this. We are invited into caring for the green pastures and the still waters. We are called into the nurture and repair. This is sacred work, spiritual work, and must be ours to do.

How do we live into this shepherding metaphor? We care for the earth with acts of love, and we care for one another with the same.

>>Mary Jo on immigration<<

Later in John's gospel, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." John's gospel lays out the Jesus Way for us as the way of love. There is no way around that singular message. This command I give you: love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know you are my disciples: that you have love for one another. When Peter has denied Jesus then stands before a resurrected Christ, the question isn't "What's wrong with you, you awful mess of a person? What's with all this baggage you carry and won't let go? Why can't you get this right?" Those aren't ever the questions Jesus asks. That's not the tone Jesus takes with us. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" And if the answer is yes, then the response must be feeding the sheep of the Shepherd Christ every day of our lives.

Karoline Lewis muses, "Maybe that's why Jesus is the good shepherd and not the 'awesome' shepherd, the 'out-of-this-world' shepherd. Because at some point we have to accept the fact that we are asked to be the shepherd as well. If we had to follow in 'extraordinary' footsteps, we would find every excuse possible, every explanation imaginable, to decline Jesus' command. We'd repeatedly deny our identity, deny our discipleship, just like Peter. 'Surely, you are one of his disciples, aren't you? I AM not,' said Peter. But Jesus will not let him say no. 'Simon Peter, do you love me? Tend my sheep. Feed my lambs. Shepherd my sheep.'³

"You see, 'follow me' was never only about being sheep. All along, Jesus had in mind asking Peter, asking us, 'Feed my sheep.' ...It's time for us to be the good shepherd."

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5130>

And when we are not sure we can take one more step. When we are not sure we are up to the challenge. When we think this work of loving the world in Jesus' name is just a bit too much for us. When we have cared about too much for too long and neglected ourselves. When we are too worn out and too parched to take care of someone else or something else or care about anything but our own survival, then with David Henson, let us pray:

"God of death valleys and still waters, Make us to lie down when our feet cannot stop. Lead us, stubborn [sheep] that we are, toward still waters that we may drink without fear of drowning. Restore our souls even when it strains to run away rather than look inwardly toward heaven. Bear with us as we clumsily follow after you on the path of righteousness. And, Lord, help us to begin to live in your house of mercy and of goodness, help us to join the feast in your house even today." Then we stand up and shepherd with God again. Amen.⁴

⁴ Prayer by David Henson: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2012/04/still-waters-and-death-valleys-a-lectionary-meditation/>