

The Shepherd As Outcast

Season of Easter

Fourth Sunday

John 10:22-30

Read the Bible passage: [John 10:22-30](#), The Message; or [John 10:22-30](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this post.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Every Sunday when I was growing up I looked at the stain glass image at the front of the church. It was so vivid that when I close my eyes I can still see that iconic picture of Jesus as the great Shepherd. There he was in vivid color, with the lamb over his shoulders.

There was a strange comfort in that image. But being a prairie boy lambs and sheep were not in my experience. Cows, pigs and chickens yes. And raised on Saturday afternoon cowboy movies - shepherds were always the bad guy, moving into ranching territory and ruining it. So the comfort was always colored with threat. When it was to be a comfort it turned into the image of the lonesome cowboy caring for the cattle. And those shepherd songs became cowboy songs on the lone prairie.

Competing images. Comfort and threat. It is only later that I began to ask questions of those classic images - feed my sheep. The good shepherd, the shepherd who guides you through the valley of the shadow of death, evokes a sense of calm and strength. And the lamb was an image of sacrifice, so here is the shepherd who is both lamb and shepherd.

The image of us being sheep also has its problems. It tends to be used to put down those who follow without thought. It is kind of mindlessness that some critics of religion place on believers. I think most of us are uncomfortable with being thought of as unthinking, sheep like followers.

Metaphors and images are powerful when they function on the emotional and poetic level. They work as long as we don't push the analogy to far. So there are times when we revisit the icon and ask new questions of it so it can move us into a deeper spiritual understanding.

We have to drop our agriculture understandings to move back into how sheep and shepherds were understood. Part of the mythic-poetic narrative was the one of the lamb - innocence as the one for sacrifice. It was the symbol in the passover of the liberating acts of God, from slavery to freedom, from no people to a people. It was the risk and vulnerability of the lamb that the poet was getting at - in the 23rd Psalm it was from the view point of the lamb who now has no fear, for the rod and staff comfort. The shepherd of shepherds cares for me, as the hymn puts it. Now I can face my enemies - external and internal - and overcome in love.

There is the obvious image that the role of the shepherd is keep the wolves at bay - to protect. That works but there is more. For there is the whole kingly image of the shepherd. For it is a strange image for a king -

the boy shepherd David becomes the king. A reversal of all conventional images of power and prestige. To image the power of God as that of the shepherd again would be a puzzle - protection that comes from being from persuasion not coercion.

This protective role runs into the fact that shepherds were the outcasts of society - like the fishers they were unclean by vocation. Don't let your babies grow up to be shepherds for they hang out in all the wrong places, was the song of that day.

Yet here it is the good shepherd as the sign of divinity. The lamb of sacrifice being the force of love that overcomes the threat of Imperial Powers. It turns all images of kingship and power upside down. From the outsider comes redemption. From the edges of experience comes resurrection life. It reinforces the biblical theme that God upsets the notions of respectability. It reinforces the images that the God of love welcomes all who society would call the least.

To get more fully at this reversal image of the shepherd I would ask to imagine the stain glass image this way. There is this burly, breaded, tattooed motorcycle bad guy with the lamb around his shoulders. No way is our first response. Redemption comes from there. It turns all our images of the good guy upside down and makes us focus on acts not appearance.

It is not what we say, look or believe that is crucial. What is crucial for the common good is how our faith leads to action. It is in the doing good we begin to evaluate the character of the person around us. It is to be surprised by love.

We need love. We need the unconditional love of persuasive love to get on with the getting on. What we need to do is to recognize it breaking out in the unexpected places.

I don't know if you have seen the ad for giving blood. There is the image of the stranger who picks up the man from the street and carries over his shoulder. Walks past the icons of our society and to end with the broken man now walking on his own. Then those words - "It is in us to help." A modern shepherd and lamb - and the lamb turns into the new shepherd.

Last week we watched Stranger than Fiction. It is about a man who is so stuck in his habits and is so isolated that he exists but does not live. He hears a voice in his head and discovers that he is a character in a novel - as the novelist writes he experiences. Then he discovers that the author means to kill the character. He is lost.

The dramatic turn is a young woman who is a baker. She is unconventional, tattooed, probably not the woman to bring home to mom. The camera gives us clues for there is a homeless man in background of the scenes in the bakery. Subtly you discover she has befriended him and gives him milk and cookies. She is the shepherd who cares for the lost sheep. The main character is challenged by her - begins to experience life, the joy of life. In the process he begins to lose his fear of death. In the end, knowing the end of the novel, he lives out it - risks his life for a child. The movie could have ended there with his death but the novelist changes the ending. It is no longer a "great novel." It is a good novel and when asked why the change she says "The world needs good people like him." He has become the lamb and the shepherd.

So it is the dual function of God who is both lamb and shepherd. It is the willingness to die for the sheep that God leaves the role of shepherd to be the lamb. It is a powerful image of the God who protects us and suffers

with us. The protection is suffering is a reality but we are not stuck there, we are defined by it, for with support and love we can live with it and with help of others overcome suffering. We can together build a new kingdom of love on earth.

The lamb is not sent to be a sacrificial offering, for it is the lamb who destroys all images of handing over a sacrifice to appease - no demand of someone has to die to save us. It is, rather, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world not through sacrifice but by experiencing our suffering and not being overcome. It is the shepherd who walks with us, feels with us who gives us the strength to be the lamb and shepherd for others. It is the noble hero who knows the risks and keeps the course for justice.

We know those people, named and not named who can be counted upon to speak justice and compassion to the forces that seek to destroy. They are the Nelson Mandals, the Martin Luther Kings and those whose name never hit the front page. We have all had a shepherd who revealed the persuasive love of God for all of creation to us. And know what. We too can be that shepherd. And know what, we have been that shepherd who brings healing comfort to those in pain, who feel in our very being the fears of the world and are not undone. We have been those who have kept the wolves of life away.

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