

ACTS 9:36-43 Fourth Sunday of Easter; Sunday of the Good Shepherd
PSALM 23 May 1, 2022; Year C
REVELATION 7:9-17
JOHN 10:22-30

***Sheep Stuff! Sheep Story!
The Problem with Sheep!***

Of all the animals found in the proverbial kingdom, it just had to be a sheep! A sheep! Yes, the Bible and supposedly Jesus, calls us to be a docile, domesticated, sheep who benignly, blindly, and boringly follow the shepherd. Yes, today is the Sunday of the Good Shepherd, always the Fourth Sunday of Easter, about halfway through this high and holy season of Eastertide. For instance, why, oh why, did it have to be a sheep? I mean, think about it. Think about all the animals we read about in the Bible, not to mention all the unnamed ones that entered the mythical ark two by two, all except for the misfortunate unicorn. Pick one! Why couldn't we have been compared with a lion, roaring with pride, king of the jungle, symbolic in human form of a strong and dominant force among the various tribes and clans. No, not the lion portrayed in Isaiah's peaceable kingdom, the one that would lay down with the lamb, but the kind of lion that would have been in the den where we once found Daniel, eliciting fear and respect, getting everybody's rapt attention, putting our enemies on notice not to dare mess with us because we mean business. Or how about a gazelle, alluringly sleek and swift footed, described in the most seductively, even salaciously, beautiful prose composing some of the greatest love story escapades ever told, the heavily alliterative poetry found in the Song of Solomon. Or perhaps a bull, a raging bull, a matador's dream, full of testosterone, huffing and puffing, and demanding some serious respect. Or how about a stallion, excellent example, tall and magnificent, gracefully galloping freely while exuding an assurance and self-confidence. After all it is Kentucky

Derby weekend! How 'bout Rich Strike and those odds? Or how about the slithering snake, beguilingly referred to as a serpent in scripture, conniving and cunning, most clever and intuitive. Maybe a crocodile, sneaky and stealthy as it stalks its prey. Or better yet, how about an eagle, a member of the Accipitridae family of bird life, you knew I would get there, especially since we are located right smack dab in the middle of Eagle River. Yes, that's the ticket, an eagle, a grand bird of prey, the proudest of fowl. I love all the verses that laud the magnificent grace of an eagle in flight, soaring above the gravitational pull of earth, much of it spawning beautiful musical imagery. "But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength! They shall mount up with wings like eagles! They shall run and not be weary! They shall walk and not faint!" (Isaiah 40:31). In Exodus (19:4) God tells the liberated children of Israel as they made their escape from Egyptian bondage "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." According to one source, eagles are mentioned in the biblical narrative thirty-four times! Even a goat has more self-differentiation than a sheep! And yet it is the goats that get an unfairly biased bad rap in the Gospels, a host of negative aspersions judgmentally cast their way. Oh well, at least we are not classified as either a chicken, to recall Jesus' loving "mother hen" imagery, or a camel or even worse, a jackass! But still, a sheep? Seriously! Give me a break!

As many of you are aware I briefly spent part of my life and career in Big Timber, Montana, a town surrounded by ranches. Many of those huge enterprises were devoted not to cattle but to sheep. The local high school's mascot is the Herders, and, in the gymnasium, there is a large mural depicting a most pastoral, picturesque setting beholding the sheep and their shepherd, a solitary figure sitting contemplatively on a rock while smoking his trusty pipe, his smoke his only companion bringing a modicum of comfort. It is impossible to live in Sweet Grass County and not be reminded of the very beautiful, pastoral, sheep imagery we imagine when we read the biblical narrative, especially the

Psalm the 23rd Psalm specifically chosen for this special feast day in Eastertide. But in all honesty, sheep can be rather nasty, filthy, creatures, just gross, their wool greasy and matted in a most disgusting way. Every year I had the opportunity to assist with the annual sheep shearing at a local ranch owned by a family in the church. This event was literally a spring rite of passage that was always a communally celebrated enterprise, a long held standing tradition kept among the close-knit sheep ranching community. The goal of us volunteers would be to get all the nervous and somewhat stubborn herd to move up the shoot, one by one, a process that demanded all hands-on deck spaced no more than about two feet apart. The sheep knew from memory what was coming with this 30 to 45 second disturbance to most of the exterior parts of their anatomy. The only way to get them to move, boy or girl, was to grab certain anatomical parts and twist like there was no tomorrow, the sheep suddenly bursting forward like a rocket ship into the waiting arms of the shearer, a professional who made good money making the rounds to the various ranches. When it was all over, the sheep were thrilled with their beautiful new hairdo and their knew-found freedom as they playfully frolicked about on the other side of this briefest torturous inconvenience. It was as if they suddenly had amnesia and forgot what transpired moments earlier as they were unceremoniously flipped on their sides and back like a pancake or a fried egg. They were now liberated for summer, their strait jackets not-so-politely removed, bagged, tagged, and now ready to be shipped overseas and made into highly overpriced designer garments bought by many of us “fashionistas”!

Sheep truly possess a herd mentality, moving like schools of fish in a bizarre dance of follow the leader, the leader not necessarily apparent in any perceivable pecking order. And yes, the role of the shepherd is essential when nudging these passive not-so-beasty beasts to a new location, moving them to lusher and greener pastures, especially as they are driven down the middle of a highway to their next

destination. I have turned aside and witnessed this great sight! And it is at the intersection of sheep and shepherd where the myriad scriptural images clearly come into play, the imagery of sheep and shepherd with Jesus holding the one while exposing the ninety-nine, softly and tenderly, and yes, strongly leading the way, following in King David's royal legacy as a former sheep herder. Yes, Jesus became the quintessential herder in every way imaginable! These pastoral portraits are indeed magnified to, yes, biblical proportions. The problem with metaphor then, i.e., in ancient biblical times, and now in our contemporary twenty-first century postmodern setting, is their ability to frequently break down like an automotive lemon. When metaphors are good, they are very good and when they are bad, they are very bad! The problems with sheep and shepherd allegories is not with the shepherd, kind and gentle, caring and compassionate, protective, until one needs to be summarily sacrificed, slaughtered for dinner, but rather the problem is with the sheep, when this animal seemingly lacking in personality is used as a human symbol. After all, this is an animal that in any estimation, with even the best benefit of the doubt, simply does not meet the high standard, mirroring in any positive or productive way the human creature. I would suggest that it is a very biblical idea, despite its quintessential biblical qualities, that ironically, perhaps counter-intuitively, creates, encourages, or at the least, reinforces bad theology. After all, biblically and realistically, we have come to know of and yes, believe, another very biblical image, a better one I would dare suggest, that we are created in the divine image of the Holy in ways that contradict even the best sheep symbolism. Metaphors must never be allowed concretization in any absolute literal way because they will inevitably fail miserably.

When it comes to sheep it is hard if not impossible to totally get into the mind of the biblical writers, what they were thinking when and why they chose a sheep, we may never know. Perhaps these creatively writing literary composers frankly did not spend enough time

thoroughly analyzing and considering this metaphorical imagery. After all, lambs without blemish were the ultimate sacrifice in the primitive rituals of the Israelites, many young offspring destined to die an early death slaughtered in a bloodthirsty ritual on Altars specifically designed for dicing and slicing and burning, all in a perceived vain attempt to appease an apparently angry, childish, petulant, and retributively punishing judgmental deity. Yikes!

The Bible calls us to follow Jesus, to act in and on his behalf, mimicking the way he carried and conducted himself as he went about his teaching and preaching. To this day we gladly, joyfully, follow in Jesus' precious footsteps as we now carry his mantle, continuing his legacy by seeking to carry out his socially justice infused mission and ministry, action being the operative word here. Nothing about his proactive processes and procedures, his protocols, ever remotely suggested the passiveness of a sheep, but rather that we become like him in as much as possible, that we become the epitome of Christs, Jesus' hands and feet, and yes, having his gracious heart and mind, boldly and proudly serving in the world as we seek to address global ills and meet countless needs as we encounter them. A sheep cannot do that! Period! A sheep can graze and follow and make strange bleating noises until it is sheared or sacrificed! Yes, with every bleat of our hearts! Bah!!! That was baaaad! Don't sign me up for any of that! We are told in the Bible that we embody the very divinity of an incredibly creative creating God, imbuing us with holiest potential, empowering and emboldening us for greatness as active participants, yes, helping shape the realm of God on earth, perhaps even as it is in the eternity of the heavenly places, validating our time here on this planet in our ever-shrinking global village. If we take the sheep analogies too stridently, they will indicate to us, perhaps even persuade us, that we simply need to be the proverbial bumps on a log and do nothing other than have our needs met, waiting to be waited on, while looking to be fed our next meal.

This problem is inherently found in a Christian culture reared in a market driven belief and faith mostly devoid of works. There is a whole cottage industry touting material designed to feed our spirits, feed our souls, and ignore the plights of the world that desperately need our attention. You can find such drivel on either side of the ecclesiological, theological aisle, pervading every perspective on the spectrum. It is oft articulated by those who expect of their leadership, pastoral included, that they “feed me” as if they were at a buffet with a smorgasbord of a menu! Yes, let’s acknowledge that these images are biblical, but I sincerely believe are a cop out as they are blown way out of proportion as proof texts indicating that all we need do is believe in some precepts, have some faith, and need nothing more than conversion, than getting “saved”. **There is far more to the Christian life than signing on the proverbial dotted line! Many have died for the cause because of their outspokenness and their activities. Last week we read where Peter is told to feed the sheep, to tend the sheep, Peter put in the role of active leadership. Folks, it is an expectation of us all when we sign on the dotted line and promise to follow Jesus. Yes, the fact remains that we are indeed fed in our feeding, we are fed when we are active, participatory in our call to do for others, addressing the myriad needs of those Jesus referred to as the least and last of these, offering cups of cold water, as we feed, quench, clothe, and visit, yes, fulfilling the social justice demands of Jesus’ gospel. Therein is our initiative, our motivation! This, my friends, is the part of the equation that often gets left out, giving a fallacious permission, the ultimate fallacy influencing believing and faithful followers, encouraging them to lean into an immobilized laziness, to simply exist, happily studying scripture with spiritually fulfilled heads in the clouds. Oh my!**

The call of Christ in following the person of Jesus of Nazareth is that every sheep is also a shepherd, and we must develop the capacity to be smart enough, intuitive enough, to be able to figure out which is which, when is when, where is where, how is how, and who is who! Yes, it is

up to us to use our God-given brains as critically thinking, intellectually curious creatures, and the following goes without saying though I say it anyway, who are far superior to the hopelessly dependent mindset of a domesticated sheep. It is imperative that we be able to differentiate these subtleties, to navigate and negotiate these nuances that accompany our daily lives. Therein is our challenge, our sacred task! The late Baptist theologian Carlyle Marney wrote a book called *Priests to Each Other*! I want to prostitute the title of his book just a little, though using his similar intended imagery, and dare suggest that we are to be shepherds to one another even as we are all sheep on occasion. Yes, we are both/and, not either/or, and all the time often even at the same time! We can never always be recipients of the grace of God and of others even as we cannot possibly always be givers of the same grace. It is a mutually satisfying operation, giving and taking, offering and receiving, each of these blessings yes, that are indeed a blessing! It is all about balance, achieving a healthy equilibrium, not too weighted in either direction. It is what the Chinese have long called “yin and yang!” This is part of the delightful serendipity of life, the magic and mystery of our daily living. You cannot plan for it or measure it.

It is impossible to make sure our giving and receiving is always equitable, distributed fairly like in the bizarre way we are prone or guilted into returning a dinner invitation just because someone previously invited and hosted us. We know full well that there are always some among us who will have more needs, be more needy, than others! That is the nature of our collective human lives! Our giving and receiving must never be reduced to any mathematical equation, any formulaic system that cheapens our giftedness one to the other and vice versa. Again, that is part of the meaning of walking by grace and not by sight. Some things simply cannot be qualified or quantified, lest they become less than intended. As the Beatles once sang, we are all on a “magical mystery tour!” Yes, “Roll up (We’ve got everything you need), roll up for the mystery tour; Roll up (Satisfaction guaranteed),

roll up for the mystery tour; The magical mystery tour is hoping to take you away, hoping to take you away; dying to take you away!” Indeed, when we let ourselves go and be led by the Spirit, amazing things can happen in our lives, every day a surprising mystery full of magic. We can see new places, meet new people, do new things, all combined making us better human beings while embracing the creative capacity within each one of us as a divinely made and stamped image of holiness and/or divinity. Folks, sheep are not on any semblance of a “magical mystery tour!”

At the end of the day and in the final analysis sheep are nothing more than an inbred utilitarian four-legged not-so-beasty beast, not destined for greatness, but rather for the latest designer apparel or the plate! Yes, I am arguing with the Bible a little here! What’s new? But we all know this to be so! So, let’s just shoot the hostage and name it for what it is! Yet, even with this understanding, on occasion indeed we all are sheep, and like sheep we have gone astray and put ourselves at risk or in peril and are desperately in need of tending to get us back to whatever constitutes our own personal convictions, our version of the straight and narrow that guides our lives and our living. Sometimes we cannot help but embracing our inner insecure “sheepness”, but those days must be limited, few and far between for our own emotional, mental, physical, and yes, spiritual health. These days must be far outnumbered by our capacity to give and do, yes, to serve as we follow as obedient sheep and on other occasions as we dare to audaciously lead as a shepherd with a high degree of compassion and caring. On our better, if not our best, days, we are all shepherds, carrying the ball of Jesus’ gospel, a social gospel message, meaning, and movement, best and most perfectly illustrated by doing good, being kind, graciously attentive, in the hope of achieving the greatest hope constituting the “real” salvation of our humanity and the human species. So, be all you can be as a human being! Be the best human being you can be! Be a shepherd on your best days, doing

all you can do in your being! Be a sheep when you must because all of us get weary on life's journey and can use a little rest every now and then! And remember, "The Lord is my shepherd! I shall not want!" The Holy One makes me lie down in green pastures, anointing my head, my cup overflowing, even when we walk through the darkest valleys of death. We truly have nothing to fear, except maybe for fear itself, knowing that "surely," if my name is not Shirley, "goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives!" Yes, it is good to be the shepherd; it is good to be the sheep! But it is better to be both and have the wisdom to know the difference! Thanks be to God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, a shepherd who aspires for us to be one too! Amen and amen!