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On Sheep & Shepherds

John 10:11-18



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Sheep. Sheep and shepherds. The Bible is chock full of sheep and shepherds. And for the most part, up until Exodus, everybody had a hand in tending the livestock, especially the sheep.

The first brothers in Genesis, -- Abel was a keeper of the sheep, while Cain was a farmer. Moses' wife, Zipporah, tended the flocks of her father with her sisters. Then she married Moses who was shepherding when he discovered the burning bush. The most famous shepherd of all, even the Great King David started out as a shepherd boy. Then of course there's the romantic image of the shepherds in the fields the night of the Christmas story.

So the image of the good shepherd – or at least 'a' shepherd, good or not – is found throughout scripture in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Today we're looking at John 10:11-18. In this passage, Jesus is talking to the Pharisees about who he is, because the Pharisees, are unable to agree on whether or not Jesus is who he says he is.

The fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, is a fascinating work. It's noticeably different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke in both tone and content. The Gospel of John has different stories, different events, and even different characters that just aren't in the other gospels. John doesn't even have a Christmas story. No virgin, no angels, no wise men, and no shepherds – well, not yet anyway. I mean, there was just "the Word,"— "the Word was with God," and "the Word became flesh." It's downright mystical.

Traditionally the fourth Gospel was always thought to have been written by John of course. You know, the disciple John – John, the fisherman, one half of the two 'sons of thunder', the son of Zebedee. Some say that's why he isn't mentioned by name in the gospel – only arrogantly referring to himself in the third person as the disciple that Jesus loved; the disciple who ran faster than peter, beating him to Jesus' tomb like it was some kind of competition.

A number of scholars still hold to that theory, while others are beginning to doubt that John could have written such a mystical work with such a highly developed theology. In other words, it doesn't sound like the work of some provincial Galilean fisherman. They recommend that we read this book as though it was written by an anonymous author in some unknown place in some unknown time. Still other scholars have begun looking at differences in style like language and grammar, inconsistencies in sequence and weird

repetitions in the story line. These scholars believe that the Gospel according to John was written by multiple authors living in several different locations.

To complicate matters, there's evidence that this passage we're looking at today isn't even part of the original manuscript. A redactor, as scholars call these secondary writers, actually took some of the sayings and speeches of Jesus from another work of the time and stuck them in where he thought they would support the theology or the story line.

If you read the chapters before and after today's passage, it sounds and feels like it was just stuck in there. Here's Jesus having this discussion with the Pharisees – later the author calls them “the Jews” but that's just more evidence of multiple authors – but Jesus is talking to some Pharisees during the hubbub that ensues following the famous healing of the blind man. Not only are they having serious doubts about the blind man's story, they also doubt that Jesus is who he says he is, and they're turning the discussion toward themselves, of course, “Surely, we are not blind, are we?”

Jesus gives them one of his typical answers -- you know, cryptic, and ambiguous -- and then, out of the blue he starts talking about sheep and shepherds! Now, it's possible that the writer did this intentionally as a literary device. Shake up the reader to make a point. After all, chapter nine is dedicated to discussion of the blind and chapter ten is all about sheep and listening to the shepherd. To the reader it sort of feels like there's a bump in the road, a lurch in the storyline.

“So what's it all mean? The history is fascinating, but I want to know: what is Jesus talking about? What does he mean when he says “I am the good shepherd?”

As I mentioned, up until the exodus out of Egypt, almost everyone participated in the care and well-being of the sheep. Everyone did it -- from the sons of wealthy chieftains to their wives and daughters. Remember Moses' father-in-law Jethro and his daughters?

But eventually, after escaping the bondage of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites got it into their heads that settled life was a good and civilized way to live. Those that cared for the sheep, having to live nomadic lives outside of town, were considered uncivilized, the bottom of the social ladder, and generally 'less than' everyone else. They were basically homeless. They were smelly and also 'unclean' in a religious sense. They were for all practical purposes the untouchables of their day. Even David, the future King of Israel, was totally overlooked and almost didn't even make the running when Samuel was sent to anoint the next king. Why? ...because David was 'just a shepherd.'

Jesus talks about three kinds of people in this passage: the shepherd, the thief and the hired hand. Then he talks about the sheep. The sheep hear. The sheep listen. The sheep follow. The sheep have traditionally been the people of Israel, and God sent the shepherd to call and to lead the sheep. And the sheep, apparently, are supposed to recognize the shepherd's voice and go with him.

The thief comes to take what doesn't belong to him. The hired hand works out OK for a while, he does his job, but when the going gets tough he runs away. Jesus is the shepherd, and a good shepherd at that. He calls the sheep in the morning and leads them to water and green pastures – good food. He watches over the sheep, keeps them from wandering, and protects them from bandits and wild animals.

Outcast, humble, and devoted, the shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. What would the sheep do without him? The shepherd is there so the sheep can have a good life, for a long time. Shepherds, to my way of thinking, have a certain gentleness toward the young and the weak.

This image of the shepherd is one that people of the first and second century would surely understand – especially the Jews, since scriptures are so full of sheep and shepherds -- whether they agreed with it or not. They would get the metaphor. Some clearly understood and loved the shepherd; some understood and did not love the shepherd; and some, as it turns out, never understood.

I found this doozy in Ezekiel 34 that the Pharisees would probably have known by heart:

“Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.”

This passage goes on and on about how rotten the shepherds have been; how the sheep are all scattered, and how God is going to come and look for them personally. “Don't you make me come down there! -- I'll stop this car!” The good shepherd is coming and the Pharisees had to have understood the reference.

Enter the Good Shepherd. Jesus loves the sheep like they're his own children, he never leaves them, and is willing to die to keep his flock out of harm's way. Even when the wolf is at the door. Even when they wander off. Sheep do have a tendency to wander off... Even when the grass isn't quite as green as expected. I think I'd like to get to know this shepherd.

But there's something else. There's something else Jesus says that intrigues me. This good shepherd said he would be willing to die, not just for the Pharisees and the other Jews he was talking to, but he would die for some 'other sheep' too – sheep from another flock.

Did you catch it? It's easy to miss it. Almost under his breath Jesus is like "Oh by the way...I have some other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."

Every time I read it I still hear this tiny voice in my head saying, "What? There's other sheep?" Who are they? What other sheep?

Scholars mostly agree that these other sheep Jesus was referring to are the gentiles. The gentiles are the non-Jews, right? Did you ever think of yourself as 'other sheep' --not of this fold? I never have but I think that's us. And one pastor recently wrote, "...like every generation of 'other sheep,' we soon forget the miraculous gift of being brought into God's one flock." We soon forget the miraculous gift of being brought into God's one flock.

If I can forget so easily that I am one of those 'others', clearly, I should not be the one to judge who the other 'others' might be. I mean, who then feels welcomed by me, and who is left feeling 'othered'?

When our church changed the sign out front to reflect the new worship time, I had the sign guy add one little phrase. "Just squeeze it in somewhere people will see it," I said. Because I can get it wrong so easily, it seemed very important that people know unequivocally, that here in OUR church, "All are welcome," – Even the other sheep. Period. It's on the sign.

Maybe that's what Jesus' message really was that day.

Amen.