

Year B – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – 22 April 2018  
John 10:11-18

Sometimes it seems when we read the Bible it is a bit out of date. The places are no longer the same. The expectations of the people written in The Good Book no longer seem applicable, at least not without some creative discernment. And the examples and parables make little to no sense in our current society. Take today's image of the good shepherd. What does that have to do with who we are in Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? We don't have shepherds here. We have electric fences and four-wheelers when we need to bring in stray sheep. But then, how many of us spend any regular amount of time rounding up strays these days anyway? No, sometimes the images Jesus used don't seem to gel with the reality in which we live.

So, as interpreters of the Word, it becomes our job as Christians to figure out just what Jesus was talking about when he referred to shepherds and vineyards and all of those other obscure references. In order to figure out what Jesus might be saying to us today, we need to know what he was saying to the people of his own day. What we're about to do is an experiment with a little amateur exegesis. (Exegesis is a big word that simply means that Bible studiers are going to explore the meaning of words and passages within a text.) That being explained, let's exegete!

Shepherds 2000 years ago: what was their life like? How are we to understand what Jesus was calling himself to people who actually knew what shepherds did and what they were like?

In Jesus' time, shepherds were common in all senses of the word. They would be men or boys who were hired to live with the sheep in the fields. The sheep weren't rounded up every night and bedded down in a warm barn. Most of the time they could be found, night or day, out in the pastures or fields fattening up on grass and scrub for their inevitable ending as sacrifice, dinner or, if they were perfect and still lambs, the main course at the Passover Meal. While their wool and their hides would have been used, they were not what our little nursery rhyme dictates: clean and cute with fleece as white as snow. They would have been dirty, smelly and numerous. The shepherd would have had his hands full keeping them all out of harm's way and he would have been present in the fields with them twenty-four hours a day.

Now remember, this is two thousand years ago. There weren't any Holiday Inns or Best Westerns on every corner. The shepherds would sleep in the fields; bathe in the river, if they bathed at all. And they were separated for weeks at a time from polite society. We talk about the language of a sailor. Imagine what these shepherds would say when they realized that one of their flock had wandered away into the brush. These were rough and tumble, blood, sweat and tears kind of guys. And while their charges would be welcomed at the temple as part of a sacrifice offered for atonement of sins, the shepherds themselves would have been considered unclean and kept as far away from the temple as possible by the gentry of the day.

So, now that we have some understanding of the image of Jesus' Jewish listeners would have had when he referred to himself as the 'good shepherd', what would you be thinking if you were in their place? (After all, you *are* in their place today!)

This man whom you have chosen to follow by virtue of your Baptismal Promises and your presence here today, has just offered you a graphic description of what his role is for society. How do we reconcile the clean, calm and gentle Jesus we hear about in Sunday School, with the Jesus covered in dust, not worrying about what the neighbours will think of him, as he focuses entirely on the task at hand – saving every one of the sheep with particular attention to those which were lost?

The image of Jesus walking the hills, staff in hand, counting his flock over and over again, and searching high up and low down when one of them went missing, is powerful. Sure, we know that Jesus gave us many instructions about loving our neighbours as ourselves. And he talked about praying to God on a regular basis, and worshipping with integrity, but he has also given us an image of the hard work he did, and still does, as the Good Shepherd.

As a shepherd he wasn't worried about whether or not his neighbours back home were concerned with his lifestyle. He wasn't too preoccupied by the idea of who was running the show back in town. His sole focus was on each and every one of his sheep. If even one of them was lost or hurt, he was there to make sure they were found and tended to. And as a good shepherd, if it came to him losing his life to protect the sheep, he would do just that. It was his job, his vocation, and his choice to put the sheep before himself in importance. He would do whatever was called of him, if it was in the best interest of one of his sheep.

If Jesus were here today, what image would he use to substitute for the shepherd? There are so many that he could use: firemen or police; doctors or nurses; teachers and lifeguards. The truth is that he could use any profession, any vocation that was being exercised by a Christian.

There is no job or profession that is excluded from the possibility of becoming that of the good shepherd. If a baptized Christian is working as a gas station attendant, then, then he has many opportunities to make sure that the tires of a car are full and safe for the driver. If a baptized Christian is working as a volunteer at a nursing home then she has many opportunities every day to sit and talk with people who feel like that sheep who has been lost from the flock.

There is no reason that each and every one of us could say that we don't have opportunities to reach out for those lost sheep every day. Some of us may be like the more traditional version of a shepherd: like Eddie who works every day at Hope Cottage welcoming people in to a warm meal and even warmer community and conversation. Some of the people he serves haven't seen a shower or a warm bed in days. Others simply need a gentle conversation and to know that someone cares that they exist. Or maybe we might more easily recognize ourselves in the shepherd who sits on her front porch every day and talks with the neighbor children as they get off the bus.

This world is full of sheep that are cut off from the flock, who feel like they are caught in the brambles and are calling out for release. Out there, beyond the

doors of our church, not all of those sheep looks lost. All too often they seem to be fitting in with every other sheep, but if you were to take a closer look, you might see that in their eyes there is only a flicker where there should be a flame.

You and I have been commissioned by Jesus to become like the good shepherd. We are to lay down our lives so that others might be saved. We are to accept the possibility that God might expect us to go out of this church, into the fields of the world alone, tired and hungry to save one of His sheep. And we are expected to listen for the sounds of those sheep bleating from their place of hiding, waiting for us to come and save them. But maybe most importantly, Jesus expects that we will trust him when he sends us looking for those lost sheep. We need to trust that he will guide us to them so that we might know where to look and what to say as we bring them into the sheepfold where they will be safe, sound and nurtured.

Jesus has called us to be shepherds in this world in whatever ways we can, so that when the sheep are called to come in not one will be left in the wilds. We all have chances to seek out and bring into the fold those who have lost their way. But before we can know that they need to be sought out, we have to make sure we have been watching our Good Shepherd and learning from him how to become shepherds ourselves. We all have sheep we are called to find by first leaving this place and going in search of them and we will find that it is not as difficult as it may seem. We will also find that it is the most rewarding feeling to know that we helped the Lord ensure that not one of His sheep were lost.