

Psalm 23

John 10:1-18

April 30, 2023

Good Shepherd Sunday

The Sacrament of Baptism

THE SHEPHERD AND THE SHEEP

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On my sister-in-law's recommendation, last Sunday night Nancy and I watched the first episode of "The Reluctant Traveler" on Apple TV+. According to the Apple TV+ website, "Award-winning actor and nervous explorer Eugene Levy steps out of his comfort zone for a whirlwind tour of the world's most beautiful and intriguing destinations." Here's a brief summary of the first episode: "Eugene heads to the Arctic TreeHouse in Finland for a spot of ice fishing, husky sledding, vodka sipping, and an exploration of happiness."

He also visited with a couple in their traditional and temporary *lavvu* or *lavvo*, which is similar to the Native American tipi, although less vertical and more stable in high winds. His hosts served him reindeer steaks which were cooked over an open fire in the lavvu. Eugene Levy was leery of trying the meat, but admitted that he was "all in" for the experience. After his first bite, he said, "This is delicious. It melts in your mouth!"

The next morning, his hosts took him along to work their day jobs with them. They are *boazouvazzi*, literally "reindeer walkers," or reindeer herders. When Levy saw the countless reindeer coming toward them, he said, "I can only hope they don't know I probably ate one of their brothers last night!" The Sami people of the Lapland region of Finland bring their reindeer down from the mountains as winter approaches. Approximately 7,000 "reindeer walkers" herd about 200,000 reindeer from their grazing pastures. The owners separate the reindeer into large herding pens. According to one source, "some go to the slaughterhouse, while others are kept for breeding. A select few males are neutered and trained to work, either pulling sleds or racing." A videographer who made a short film about the "reindeer walkers" described her experience this way: "The reindeer make the most incredible noises. You can hear them from a long distance, and it is beautiful." She was struck by the energy of the animals, "I will never forget standing in the path of the running reindeer and barely being brushed by them. Moving at that speed and with those antlers, it's amazing how they manage to avoid obstacles." But she gave this warning, "Don't ever ask a Sami "reindeer walker" how many reindeer he has. It is considered impolite. It is like asking someone how much money he has in his bank account. The Sami say their money 'roams around.'"¹

When Nancy and I were in seminary, there was an international student studying Old and New Testament and biblical languages. One day in Bible class, the professor asked him to explain to the class what he intended to do with his studies. He was

training to be a Bible translator and hoped to translate the scriptures into his native language. He also shared with us some of the difficulties and obstacles to making a good translation. He used the 23rd Psalm as an example. I remember him saying, “In my country, we have no sheep. Therefore, we have no shepherds. In fact, we don’t even have words for ‘sheep’ and ‘shepherd.’ What we do have, however, are plenty of ducks and we call the person who takes care of ducks the ‘duckman.’” He then told us how the duckman cares for his ducks — keeps them safe, feeds them, makes sure they have enough clean water, etc. “So,” he explained, “I could render a literal translation of Psalm 23, but it would have no meaning for my people. However, if I translate it, ‘The Lord is my duckman, I shall not want . . .,’ everyone will know exactly what kind of God we have!”

Reindeer walker, duckman, shepherd . . . it doesn’t seem to matter what the person is called. What is most important is what the person does. Think about it — anyone who is charged with the well-being and nurture of a group of people has basically the same tasks: keep them safe, help them thrive, keep them together, and supply them with what they need. Isn’t that true for a teacher? A choir director? A school principal? A coach? And, yes, a church pastor. In fact, the word “pastor” comes directly from the Latin word *pastor* which is taken from *pastus*, the past participle of *pascere*, which means “to lead to pasture, set to grazing, cause to eat.”

I don’t know about you, but I’m not familiar with sheep and shepherds, except for stories in the Bible and the classic Sunday School picture of Jesus carrying a cute, little, white lamb on his shoulders. We tend to romanticize and domesticate the life of a shepherd, but it was probably very hard and dangerous work. They lived out of doors. They were cut off from the community. They had to fight off wild animals that threatened their sheep. They constantly had to find places for their sheep to graze and water for their sheep to drink. And, of course, they had to deal with the sheep themselves.

If the stories in the Old and New Testaments had taken place in Duplin County, we might be reading Psalm 23 today as, “The Lord is my hog man” or “The Lord is my chicken man . . .” or even “The Lord is my cattle man . . .” But the Bible stories come to us from Palestine, Israel, and Judah, and the people were intimately acquainted with sheep and shepherds, just as the reindeer walkers of Lapland know their reindeer and the duckmen of South Asia know their ducks.

Notice that the Shepherd is the main character in both our Old and New Testament readings this morning. Psalm 23 and John 10 describe what the shepherd does for the sheep, and not the other way around. In fact, in some Bible stories and verses that talk about the sheep, they are portrayed as needing a shepherd. For example, the prophet Isaiah says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.” (Isaiah 53:6) In Mark’s story about Jesus feeding the 5,000, he tells us, “As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” (Mark 6:34) In Luke’s gospel, Jesus says, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not

leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” (Luke 15:4)

Abraham and Moses were shepherds. So were David, Isaac, and Jacob. The “shepherd” was an ancient image of leadership, both for earthly and divine leaders. Of course, as we read and heard this morning, “The Lord is my shepherd” and Jesus is “the Good Shepherd.” Earthly leaders, such as kings, priests, and religious officials, weren’t always “good shepherds.” The prophet Ezekiel spoke a devastating word of the Lord against the “false shepherds” of Israel: “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. 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. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd.” (Ezekiel 34:2-5)

The Lord’s answer to the problem of the “false shepherds” sounds a lot like Psalm 23 and John 10: “I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of thick clouds and darkness. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses . . . I will feed them with good pasture . . . there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture. . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep.” (Ezekiel 34:11-15)

If the Lord is our shepherd and Jesus is our Good Shepherd, what does that mean for us? In a blog about these verses in John 10, John Bergsma writes, “But what is a shepherd like? In Western culture, shepherding can involve a conflicted relationship with the sheep. Shepherds often drive sheep in different directions using dogs to intimidate them. But in Eastern cultures, shepherds don’t ‘drive’ the sheep, they lead them. Dogs are not used. The shepherd walks in front, and the sheep follow him, having learned to respond to his voice signals. It is said that two shepherds can mix their flocks in the same pen overnight, and in the morning, one shepherd can extricate his entire flock from the mixed group simply by making his distinctive call. It reminds us of our Lord’s words in the Gospel, ‘My sheep know my voice.’ Thus, shepherding in the ancient Near East was a much more personal affair than in modern Western culture. It was really more akin to ‘sheep whispering.’”²

So, we need to heed the Good Shepherd’s voice and follow him because, as I’ve already said, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.” As I worked with this very familiar text this week, I was glad to read some convicting (and, at the same time, welcome) thoughts about being a pastor/shepherd. Certainly I have particular responsibilities as the pastor, many of them metaphorically akin to what real shepherds do — feed the sheep, try to keep the sheep together, care for their ailments, put their well-being first. In her comments about shepherds and sheep, Barbara Essex writes, “It is tempting to use the text to chastise church members — they are the sheep in the text and we preachers are shepherds of a sort. It is more helpful for

preachers and pastors to think of themselves as sheep among sheep — all in need of new life and community offered because of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. What would it mean for us — ministers and laity — to surrender ourselves to the care of God's Good Shepherd? Too often we act more like bad shepherds than like the good shepherd that Jesus exemplifies."³

Timmy was a five-year-old boy whose mother loved him very much and worried about him constantly. When he started kindergarten, she walked him to school the first few days. One day, Timmy came home and announced he didn't want her to walk him to school any more. "The other kids make fun of me," he said. "I want to be like the big kids." She knew she had to let him grow up, but she figured out a way to keep an eye on Timmy. She asked her neighbor Nancy if she would follow Timmy to school each morning, close enough to keep an eye on him, but far away enough that Timmy wouldn't catch on. Nancy readily agreed, "I'm already up with my baby. That would be a good way for us to get some exercise." The next day Nancy and her baby followed Timmy and his buddy Ronnie as they walked to school. This went on for a week and Nancy thought she was doing a pretty good job of going unnoticed. One day, Ronnie noticed Nancy and her baby following them and asked Timmy, "Have you seen that lady and her baby following us? Do you know who they are?" Timmy said, "Yeah, I know who they are." "Well," asked Ronnie, "who are they?" Timmy said, "That's just Shirley Goodnest and her little girl Marcy." Ronnie wanted to know, "Well, why does she follow us every day?" Timmy said, "Well, every night mama makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers because she worries about me so much. And in it, the prayer says, 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life.' So, I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

Friends, fellow sheep, the Lord is our Shepherd, we shall not want. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He knows our names, he laid down his life for us. God's goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life. We don't "just have to get used to it." We can give thanks that the Lord himself is our Good Shepherd.

*Savior, like a shepherd lead us;
much we need thy tender care.
In your pleasant pastures feed us;
for our use your fold prepare.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus,
you have bought us: we are yours.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus,
you have bought us, we are yours.*

Let us pray: Lord, we would follow you wherever you might lead. Forgive us when we stumble and when we stray. Forgive us when, distracted we lose our way. Be the one to whom we turn, whose hand we hold, the Shepherd who leads us safely to the fold. Open our eyes and our ears that wherever we go, we may hear your voice calling us by name; calling us to

serve, calling us to share, calling us to praise, so that we never give up on the promise of your kingdom, where the world is transformed, and all can enjoy life in all its fullness. Amen.

NOTES

¹www.tv.apple.com and “The Adrenaline Rush of Herding Reindeer in the North Pole,” December 27, 2018 at www.theatlantic.com.

²John Bergsma, “Good Shepherd Sunday (4th Easter),” May 1, 2020 at www.thesacredpage.com.

³Barbara J. Essex, “John 10:11-18: Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 453.