

Knowing the Shepherd

Here's an advertisement from a church seeking a new rector: *Congregation seeking priest who is detail-oriented and gets the big picture, with accounting background and creative flair. Prefer someone with extensive musical experience and able to help with occasional masonry and carpentry projects. Must work well with seniors and have advanced degree in child development. Fluency in major languages of antiquity a must, along with skill and demonstrable success with social media as an evangelism tool. Seeking individual not motivated by money. Major fund-raising experience desired. Salary commensurate with our budget. Interested? Contact the search committee or ask the custodian for further information.*

Today, this fourth Sunday of Easter, our lessons lift up the image of a shepherd and we sometimes call this day "Good Shepherd Sunday." The word "pastor" literally means shepherd. That title is used because people who have jobs like mine have traditionally been seen as shepherds for churches. The pope is sometimes referred to as a "shepherd" for the church. Bishops often carry a shepherd's staff as a symbol.

But Psalm 23 places *God* in that role of shepherd. "The LORD is my shepherd." In today's Gospel Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. As a professional leader in the church these days, I'm much more comfortable maintaining the image of *JESUS* as the good shepherd. The pastor or priest with a capital P. Yet even Jesus wouldn't meet all the criteria described in the ad we heard about earlier. If we embrace this pastoral image from Scripture, I see myself less and less like the shepherd. I'll leave that to Jesus. I'm more like the DOG the shepherd uses to help manage the movement of the sheep. My role is to help facilitate your connection to the Shepherd himself, to help facilitate your connection to one another, and to help facilitate your connection to the ministry to which God calls you. So if Jesus is the shepherd, you are the sheep, and I am the dog, and I am a female dog, well, that would make my title....well, we won't go there just now....

How do we recognize the Shepherd's voice so we know *how* to follow? It's an important question, especially the discernment process you're about to enter into. As the resident dog here, helping the shepherd get you to follow him, I'll share what I know.

The shepherd is concerned with getting the sheep into the sheepfold. That involves one of two movements: the sheep come in, or the sheep go out. Spiritually speaking, according to John Ackerman who writes books about these things, we could think of two movements of the soul – the soul being the very deepest part of our persons – who we are at the core. In these two movements the soul moves either toward God or away from God – into the sheepfold, or out of the sheepfold. The movement may be a feeling, a thought, an insight, or any one of a number of inner actions or reactions. It may be slight, barely noticeable, moderate, or overwhelming. *Intensity* is not important, but the *direction* is." In other words, it's not about how fast you're running into the sheepfold, it's about what *direction* you're moving.

If the movement is *toward* God, you experience what Ignatius of Loyola called *consolation*. You might feel centered, in synch with God, grounded, alive and awake, awed or grateful, free. Faith, hope and love are the gifts of this movement toward God.

If the movement is *away* from God, you experience what Ignatius called *desolation*. You may feel out of sorts, experience a sense of darkness or agitation, everywhere or nowhere, or a sense of dullness, as if you're going through the motions, addicted to something or someone, separated from God, from others, and from your true self – who God created you to be. You experience the *absence* of faith, hope, and love.

In movements toward God, we ought to linger, and appreciate them. In movements *away* from God, the good shepherd wants nothing more than this: that we turn toward him and be honest. That may be why the psalmist says, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The psalmist knows that when he is moving away from God, all he needs to do is stop and turn around, and there the Good Shepherd will be, ready to coax and prod him through the gate. To welcome him into his open, loving arms. And so it is for you and me.

I learned something new about Psalm 23 this week that bears this out in a new way. It has to do with the word “follow,” at the end of the psalm, where it says “Surely goodness and mercy will *follow* me all the days of my life.” The word in its original Hebrew is *radaph* which is better translated “pursue.” It’s a surprising verb given that it is usually *enemies* that are pursuing with an intent to overtake and destroy. And the word “surely” is better translated “only.” So that verse, more accurately translated, would say something more like this: *Only goodness and mercy will be chasing me down, will be pursuing me.* God *pursues* us with that divine goodness and mercy. God pursues us even so far as to lay down his very life for the sheep.

Do we sheep – and dog – keep running from that goodness? Or do we ever stop, turn around, and surrender? Do we ever let that goodness and mercy envelop us and carry us back into the fold, toward all that the good shepherd wants for us?

What does *church* look like if *Jesus* is the shepherd or Pastor and Bishop, and the clergy leader is the *dog* helping the sheep to *connect* to the good shepherd? This is something for you to think about during this time of transition. This model looks more like shared leadership. Conventional models often tend to see the Rector as being solely responsible for the success of the church’s ministry. But the Rector is not the paid Christian. You now have the opportunity to explore and embrace a shared direction, based on the principle that ministry is a mutual endeavor. It’s about interdependence. It’s about both mutual dependence on the Good Shepherd and mutual responsibility for carrying out the ministry of the Good Shepherd. It’s a model that comes out of this chapter of John’s gospel. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus says: “I am the gate for the sheep.” And not only do the *sheep* have to pass through the gate. So do the shepherds. And so does the dog. Shepherd, sheep and dog pass through the same gate. Leaders and followers. What gives them authority is not that they are shepherds or sheep, or even dogs, but that they go through the same gate, and the gate is our Lord himself, pursuing each one of us, clergy and lay, leaders and pew sitters, with divine goodness and mercy. In the church, that is ultimately where true authority lies: not with the people, not with the vestry, not with the rector, not even with the bishop, or policy and procedures manuals or canon law, but with Christ. Our call is to know the shepherd.

The point is captured in this often told story that is dear to my heart. A great actor was asked at a gathering to recite Psalm 23. So with great drama and flair, he mounted the stage and artfully articulated the vivid imagery of the familiar poem. The people were entertained, but not really moved.

Later, in the same program, an older woman was asked to make some kind of contribution to the evening. She apologized. She explained that she could think of nothing else to do but recite Psalm 23. Her voice cracked, she stumbled over many of the words, and people had to strain to hear her. Yet, when she finished, there wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

The great actor climbed onto the stage, hugged the woman, and expressed his conviction about what had made the difference. He said, “I know the psalm, but she knows the shepherd.” Amen.

Pastor Dana Runestad

22 April 2018 ~ Fourth Sunday of Easter (B)
St. John’s Episcopal Church ~ Plymouth MI

Sources:

John Ackerman, *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations*, Alban Institute, 2001

Joel LeMon, *Commentary on Psalm 23*, Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2372