

“Love Shelters and Gives Life”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
First Sunday in Lent
Edina Morningside Community Church; February 18, 2018

John 10:1-18

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Before the Christmas program a couple months ago, one of our youngsters proudly pointed out that she changed roles this year. She described what she clearly considered a promotion. For the past several years, she has been a sheep. But this year, Miss Maggie was a *shepherd!* And who knows—next year, maybe an angel. And the year after that, Mary? At least she wouldn’t have to be a sheep any longer—that was for *baby* children who couldn’t do anything else.

Maggie doesn’t yet *know* that Christians keep getting called sheep even into adulthood. The image is common in the Hebrew scriptures, and Jesus uses it in today’s passage from John’s gospel. God’s people are like sheep: taken care of by hired hands, vulnerable to thieves, bandits and wolves, needing a good, faithful, loving and loyal shepherd who will lead them into green pastures. It’s not the most flattering comparison, when you stop to consider how smelly and prone to wander sheep can be. Maggie was probably right to revel in a change of character, but I’m not sure we can ignore some truth in the metaphor.

One similarity we have with sheep is the many ways we too wander astray and get ourselves lost. We listen to other voices, other shepherds, which promise pastures that never seem to materialize. The classic seductions are for more money, more intimacy, more freedom, or more weaponry as a way to achieve more security. *My* greatest desire is for more time. I am certain that if I could just have *thirty* hours in a day, get a little more done, I would be in the green pastures of abundant life. I fear failure, and disappointing people, so I can slip into believing that my worth comes from meeting external needs, rather than from God alone. A culture of desire teaches us to want a tighter body, a cooler car, younger features, and a size zero waist. Our elected leaders and the news media tend to follow the crowd, presuming that public polling and high-paid lobbyists will show the way to go.

Are you following one of these shepherds? In truth, they are all mirages in the desert—we chase them over every next hill but only succeed in getting ourselves lost. We *are* sheep, following shepherds who

don't have our ultimate good as their highest goal. These are the hired hands Jesus speaks of—who leave the sheep and run away—so that wolves snatch us up into anxiety and leave us perpetually scattered.

“I am the *Good Shepherd*,” Jesus says, and calls us to follow his voice instead of the others. However, it's not an easy path, because it requires admitting that we do not *know* the way to go. This is perhaps the most vulnerable thing you could ask from folks like us, a suburban church of mostly white, mostly well-to-do, mature adults. In this society, we are the very people who are supposed to have it all figured out, and when we find ourselves lost we believe it's our own fault since we have every advantage. But the truth is, this Good Shepherd will call us to lay down our own lives as he does. Just as he once prayed for the cup to be taken from his hands, yet said “not my will but your will be done”, sheep are called to abide in the leadership of another rather than ourselves. We trust the one whose love shelters and gives life, an eternal Love greater than the measure of our own minds.

The Heidelberg Catechism has been used by our Evangelical forebears in the United Church of Christ to teach generations of Christians about this faith. Its very first lines hold a question and answer that summarize this self-surrendering truth. “Question: What is your only comfort in life and death? Answer: That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” There is a paradoxical freedom in letting go of seeking our own salvation, and trusting ourselves “body and soul, both in life and in death” to the faithful shepherding of Jesus Christ.

When we let ourselves be led, suddenly the pressure to have it all figured out subsides. The pasture of God's greater love—beyond striving and seeking our own salvation—emerges from Jesus' call: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” The Divine Shepherd took on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, coming in bodily form to draw sheep to the good life and greater love of his ways, not our own. In a time of personal trial, when he had reached his own limits, the Trappist monk [Thomas Merton wrote a prayer](#) now famous for the ways it shows a sheep trusting in the Good Shepard. Merton writes:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you...
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

So, beloveds of God, I finish today with a little bad news and a lot of good news. The bad news is that we'll never be “promoted” from being sheep. We will always be prone to wander, and in need of guidance. Let go of the sense that we will *ever* have it all figured out, enough to chart our own path. But the good news is that we have a Shepherd who seeks us out when we're lost, whose voice we can follow, and who leads us to the green pastures of abundant life. We truly belong in sheepfolds like this one, a space of sincerity about our failings and joy in our triumphs, a community of mutuality, compassion and mission which gathers each week for renewal, and then follows the Shephard's path of greatest love when we go out the doors again. Amen.