

## Part of the Flock

Ottawa Mennonite Church  
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Scripture: *John 10:1-18, Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24*

In 2004 the BBC reported a story out of New Zealand about an animal named Shrek. Shrek, at that time, was a 10 year old merino sheep who had avoided his annual shearing for six years. His shepherds were marvelled as to how Shrek had avoided being sheared all those years. As it turned out Shrek had avoided his yearly shearing by hiding in caves. After being spotted and pursued, Shrek was eventually captured and received his long overdue shearing. At the time of his shearing, his fleece was 27 kg, or just shy of 60 lbs. While we might marvel at Shrek's cunning deception but what many of us don't realize is that this was really dangerous for Shrek. Without regular shearing the weight of the wool becomes too heavy and Shrek could have had a difficult time avoiding predators. Shrek could have very easily become caught in a bush and could have potentially starved to death.

In the Church calendar, the fourth Sunday of Easter is known as the Good Shepherd Sunday. Our scriptures this morning evoke the image of the Shepherd when speaking of God and Christ. I like the Shepherd imagery. There are many aspects that I feel drawn to, but in as much as I like the Shepherd imagery, there is always a part of it that makes me feel uncomfortable and perhaps it's the same for you too. My logical brain works it out this way: That if Jesus is the shepherd, then, we are, well, sheep.

So why is this problem? Why does being a sheep bother me? Maybe it bothers me because I feel that sheep have a bad rap. After all aren't sheep supposed to be slobbering, untidy, and dumb animals that only exist to be shaved or slaughtered? Of course if one talks to a sheep herder you quickly find out that this is not the case.

Perhaps it's because I easily get lost in the pleasant revelry of white fluffy sheep frolicking on green hillsides.<sup>1</sup> Maybe it's because when I Googled for images of sheep all I could find were idyllic images of sheep; pure, white, and blemish free. Nevertheless, even though it might bother me a bit, no matter how much I try to shift my perspective, no matter how much I want to fight against it, I am, we are, still sheep.

### **About Shepherds**

When talking about sheep and shepherds, it is important for us to remember the Jewish story; we must remember the nature of the Jewish history with God. The appropriateness of this image is at once obvious when we remember that Israel was a semi-nomadic people. Moving from place to place, it would have been difficult for them to plant gardens, livestock herding, then, makes perfect sense.

“The patriarchs had flocks and herds. God called Moses from keeping the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, to become the shepherd who would lead God’s people out of bondage. David, the shepherd lad, become the shepherd king of Israel, a man after God’s own heard. All the kings of God’s people were supposed to be shepherds, and the Messianic king of the future, Jesus, of whom David was a type, was to be the shepherd par excellence.”<sup>2</sup>

The shepherd motif is not out of place in the Bible. It is an image which both the Israelites of the Old Testament and the Jews of the New Testament can relate to. But, for us in urban Canada it is a little more difficult for us to imagine. Nevertheless shepherds still exist today, they haven’t disappeared over time. While methods may have changed, their job still remains.

### **Calling the Flock**

Bedouin shepherds in Palestine today often bring their flocks to the same watering hole around dusk. What ends up happening is that eight or nine flocks end up getting mixed together

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Preaching the Revised common lectionary. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 448.

<sup>2</sup> Rhodes, Arnold Black. *The Book of Psalms*. The Layman's Bible commentary, v.9. Richmond, Va: John Knox Press, 1961, 51-52.

around the one watering hole. Interestingly enough, the shepherds do not worry about their sheep getting mixed up with other flocks of sheep. When it is time to go home, the each shepherd issues their own distinctive call, whether it is a trill or a whistle, or a particular tune on a particular pipe, and that shepherds sheep follow their shepherd home.

As sheep we gather around the waterhole, but there are a variety of voices calling for our attention. Barbra Brown Taylor describes the confusion we as sheep feel trying to walk the fine line of being in the world but not of the world.

“You wind up at the watering hole at the end of the day and you don’t know to whom you belong to. There are so many flocks to choose from. Some of them look fatter, some look better bred, and all of them look like they know what they are doing but you. You wonder if perhaps you are a stray sheep who has somehow gotten mixed in with them, and you wonder if you would not be better off going back to the world.

Then comes the time to go home and the shepherds begin to call their sheep. You listen to their voices and you wait for that moment of recognition, for that inner voice that will tell you whose you are and where you belong, but it does not come. As the sheep move off in their tight knit flocks, each led by its own shepherd, you stand there feeling lost and you wonder, “Which one is mine? Where do I belong?”<sup>3</sup>

Our society and culture values individualism and secularism and calls those sheep. Often this leads to loneliness, isolation, alienation and hopelessness. The Good Shepherd and His flock respond to these deep yearnings by offering an authentic and holistic community. This community, this flock, is an alternative to our fears of separation and insecurity. In the Good Shepherd’s flock we know the shepherd and the shepherd knows us.

Our society and culture tells us that when we are a part of a group we have no identity, within the group there is no distinctiveness. Within the Good Shepherd’s flock we are distinct, not faceless. We benefit from the flock and the flock benefits from us. In the Good Shepherd’s

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1993, 143.

flock we are each known and valued. The Good Shepherd knows each and every sheep and recognizes each and every sound. The Good Shepherd knows when we are happy and content, and when we are worried and concerned. The Good Shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure, while the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue means food, or a two-note song means that it is time to go home.

Our society gives us images of individual security, where building higher fences, walls, and doors with locks are meant to keep people out. We install security cameras, motions sensors and security systems to protect our homes. In the Good Shepherds flock we are safe. There is a security in being a part of the Good Shepherd's flock. Alone we are more vulnerable, but by flocking together we are protected.

Each of us longs and hungers for a flock to call our own. We each search far and long for our flock in one shape or another. We create 'virtual' communities on the internet, chat in chat rooms, and join social networks such as Facebook and MySpace, searching for that flock to belong to. No matter how much we look to these other flocks, no matter how carefully we sit and listen to the other shepherds; their call will not be the right one.

At the watering hole, we might wait; we might sit wonder if and when the shepherd will call. Listen. Hear the call, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls us to join his flock, to become one of his sheep, and become a part of His flock.

Amen