

“The Good Shepherd”
Psalm 23
John 10:11-18
May 7, 2006

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois
The 4th Sunday of Easter

Please note that this is the extended version preached at the 11:00 a.m. service. The children’s story that concluded the sermon at the 9:00 a.m. service is added at the end.

“Sheep are very dumb. Of all the animals probably the dumbest, which is probably why God calls us sheep.” So says Jan Harris, my former Administrative Assistant in Clarendon Hills, who grew up on a merino sheep-farm in Australia. “Sheep are very dumb,” Jan says, in her gentle, but knowing, Australian lilt. “Sheep are very dumb, and they’re always getting into trouble. They were made to need a shepherd.” And so, my friends, are we.

Today, in this place far removed from the Australian outback, or the hills of ancient Palestine, let’s imagine what it means that Jesus calls us his sheep ... that Jesus wants us to call him our shepherd. Let’s explore the nature of sheep, and the dangers they run into, and the ways a good shepherd tends a well-loved flock. Let’s wander for a bit, back into my friend Jan’s childhood, when she learned all about being a sheep.

“Sheep,” Jan says, “keep always getting into trouble. The biggest danger is that they follow each other mindlessly into places they oughtn’t go. They’re always getting into trouble, falling off cliffs and such.” It’s sad, but I love that image, in part because it’s hard to imagine it really and truly happening. But apparently it does, and worse. Jan remembers one terrible time when they lost several hundred of their sheep in one day. “A terrible thunderstorm had come up,” she said, “when we were not around to watch them. The sheep were terrified, and scurried around looking for shelter. One of the sheep ran into the corner of the sheepfold, and all the rest of them followed him; they were so scared, they kept coming and coming, until they were piled up together on top of each other. Their thick merino wool was soaked, and the poor things smothered. It’s dangerous when they follow their instinct. It’s dangerous when they follow each other.”

I think about the ways we humans do that too. Is this herd-mentality a matter of stupidity or popularity or wanting to belong? I think of the kid who threw the post-game party, of course when his parents weren’t home, and someone brought the keg, and it seemed like a kill-joy not to allow it, and soon lots of kids were

there, and fairly loud at that, and soon the police came too. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I think of the 70s when “free love” and “open marriage” were the name of the game, and the constraint of fidelity seemed old-fashioned and quaint. I think of teenage girls who put their finger down their throat because they think they’re supposed to be thin, and the women who put silicone in their breasts because they think they don’t look right the way they are. I think of the urge so many of us feel now to buy huge houses and drive our Audis or SUVs, and we bury ourselves in things, because we think that’s what we’re supposed to do. I think of the successful businessman Studs Terkel quotes in *American Dreams: Lost and Found*, who declares that “the American dream is to be better off than you are. How much money is enough money? Enough money is always a little more than you have. There’s never enough of anything ... it’s like a mirage in the desert: it always stays a hundred yards ahead of you.” I think of the thousands of ways we throw ourselves off of cliffs, or pile ourselves into corners until we suffocate, and it makes me so sad, that we follow the crowd into danger, not even thinking twice about what it means for our lives. “Sheep keep always getting into trouble, following each other mindlessly into places they oughtn’t go,” and how it grieves our shepherd so.

But back to Jan Harris’s childhood. The herd-mentality, Jan quickly learned, is not the only way that sheep get into trouble. Wandering off on their own is equally hazardous. More than once, Jan recalls their sheep out grazing, head down to the ground, following their noses to the next tender morsel of grass. They do not look where they’re going; and soon they’re off by themselves, far away from the safety in numbers. It is there that the coyotes and other predators attack them, where they’re defenseless and alone, or they get caught in thickets where their wool gets tangled up in briars, and they’re so far away no one can hear their mournful bleats, and they are lost.

And this, too, sounds familiar to our human ears. Is this fierce individualism a result of our need for control, or a plea for attention, or is it merely cluelessness? “All we like sheep have gone astray,” the prophet says, “each one of us to our own way.” And I think of the poor lonely child I knew back in Portland, who at 12 years old had run away from home, to a life on the streets, where she thought she would find what she wanted. And I think of the driven executive who berates his employees and belittles his wife, who doesn’t have a clue how to love another person, nor does he even wonder why. And I think of the old man who valiantly and lovingly cares for his wife, but refuses to admit that he no longer has the strength or skills to tend to her alone at home, for he is so accustomed to being in control that he doesn’t know any other way of being.

If there are thousands of ways we throw ourselves off cliffs, there are at least as many ways that we wander off to dangerous places, because we're following whatever path has the greenest grass for the moment. And if we think the shepherd won't miss us, well, we're wrong.

I love the story Rev. Philip Gulley tells about the time he took a group of 25 small-town teenagers into Chicago. He says,

“We visited the lakeshore, the zoo, the museums, and a shopping mall. At each stop, I carefully counted how many children were on the bus before we left for our next destination. When we arrived at our final stop of the day, a ... downtown pizzeria, we discovered one of our girls was missing. I panicked. I took no comfort in the fact that at every previous stop we had accounted for every child. I didn't celebrate that we had 24 out of 25 – 96 percent of the children we began with, an A in any classroom in America. ... I rushed back to the shopping mall to find our lost girl. Fortunately, she was waiting patiently at the front door of the mall, certain we'd return for her.”

It sounded to Gulley just like Jesus' story of the man who owned a hundred sheep and had one wander off ... the man who left the 99 and went in search of his lost lamb: “Like any good father, when it comes to his children's welfare, God isn't satisfied with anything less than 100%” (*citation lost*).

I truly love that image: the image of a good shepherd who watches all his sheep, worries over us, counts us, knows us all by name. And when we're headed for danger or trouble, he will do everything he can to keep us safe.

Allow me one last story from Jan about how a good shepherd can even teach the sheep to help each other. The sheep that Jan grew up with were pedigree merinos, which it turns out are prone to having twins. It is a quirk of nature, Jan tells me, “that the Mama always kills the second one, because, stupid sheep that she is, she thinks she can only raise one. So our Dad would always keep an eye on the ewes he thought were carrying twins, and when it was time for them to give birth, he'd bring them inside. Our whole family would keep an eye on things,” Jan remembers,

“so that right after the first lamb was born we'd be waiting for the second one and grab it right away so its mother wouldn't kill it. The mother and the first lamb would be fine on their own; so we'd put them back in the

sheepfold. But the second lamb we would raise by hand, beginning right after birth when we'd rub it with a soft towel till we got its circulation going, and it started bleating, and then, when it was ready, we'd start feeding it by bottle. They were very soft, and they loved to snuggle, right in the spot in your neck where we hold our babies. Later they would skip and dance, and climb on tables to be king of the hill. They were adorable. Each one had its own personality, and would respond to us when we called.

“And every year, Dad would train one of the hand-raised lambs to come to him. Because, of course, when one sheep comes to you, the whole flock follows, which comes in handy when you're calling the flock back. It's very powerful. My little brother was four years old when he went one time to the shearing shed to play with the pet lamb and bring it to the house. But he left the gate open, so the rest of the flock, of course, followed. My brother ran into the house and hid under the table, while the rest of the sheep crowded into the kitchen. It took my Dad forever to get them all back in the barn.

“One of our pet sheep was especially sweet. He liked to follow the sheepdog around and copy its behaviors. Just like the pig in the movie “Babe,” this sheep would chase around the flock, running back and forth, and circling to corral them. And if a sheep got out of line, it couldn't bark, but it would stand and stomp its feet until that errant sheep behaved itself again.”

I love that image most of all. The sheep who know the shepherd best of all ... they are not only dear to him, they have a very special role to play in the drama of the flock's life. A shepherd can't be everywhere at once. But if just one sheep can learn to come when called ... if just one sheep can recognize the shepherd's voice ... if just one sheep can know to avoid trouble, and stay close to the shepherd, and not wander off from the fold ... then all the other sheep will follow it, and find their way to food, and shelter, and to safety.

I like to think that we are made that way too. I think of all the people in my own life whom I've looked up to and respected, who had heard the shepherd's voice and were familiar with it. And when I was lost and clueless, following the crowds into whatever it was they thought was important, these dear sheep so wisely led me out of harm's way, and into the paths of righteousness. Mrs. Elliott, my Sunday School teacher, and my grandmother who read to me from the Bible ... my professors in college, who took my spiritual angst seriously, but still demanded great things of me ... my mentors in ministry, John Buchanan and Jon Maxwell

Walton, who took me seriously even when I didn't ... and friends, dear, dear friends, who gently loved me back to life again after losses and sorrows and grief. These people knew the shepherd's voice by heart, and when I couldn't hear it, they listened to it for me. And I so I followed them, back into the safety of my loving shepherd's fold.

And bit by bit, over the years, I have come to know my shepherd's voice, and listen for it too. And I know without a doubt that I am loved ... and I listen when the shepherd calls my name ... and I watch where I go, so that others may follow. It is what our shepherd hopes for all of us, for each of us.

For sheep are very dumb, and they are always getting into trouble. They were made to need a shepherd. And so, my friends, are we.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Amen.

Postscript: This is the children's story that concluded the sermon at the 9:00 a.m. service.

There is a delightful little children's book that was our favorite when Annie was a young child. It was written by a local woman, Elspeth Campbell Murphy, who was a member at Fourth Church when we were there. She gave this book to Annie as a baptism gift. *Where's My Lamb?* is part of the *Brenda Learns about God* series (Elgin: Chariot Books, David C. Cook Publishing, 1987). The story goes like this:

It was a bright springtime afternoon. Brenda said to her toys, “Who wants to go for a wagon ride?” Of course, they all wanted to go. So Brenda asked, “Are you all here?” She tapped their noses and said, “Baby Doll. Baby Doll. Elephant. Teddy Bear. Easter Lamb. All set. Let's go!” Brenda pulled her wagon up and down the yard and around the daffodils. Then Mother called Brenda in for supper. Brenda said to her toys, “Hold on tight!” and she ran across the yard as fast as she could go.

After supper came bedtime. Brenda put her toys back on the bed in exactly the places she liked them to be. She tapped them on their noses and said, “Baby Doll. Baby Doll. Elephant. Teddy Bear.” Someone was missing! Brenda’s little lamb was lost! Mother said, “Maybe he’s still outside.” Daddy said, “Come on. We’ll go look for him.”

Outside it was dark and chilly. Brenda said, “The yard looks funny at nighttime! I hope my lamb isn’t too scared. I hope we can find him!” Daddy said, “We’ll find him.” Brenda said, “Daddy, does God watch over people’s Easter lambs?” Daddy said, “God watches over everything. He’s taking care of you and me.” Brenda shined her flashlight by the daffodils. And sure enough ...

“Easter Lamb!” Brenda said. She picked up her little toy and cuddled him. Daddy picked up Brenda and cuddled *her*. Brenda said, “Daddy, just supposed *you* had toys. And suppose one of them was a little lamb called Brenda. What if Brenda-the-Lamb got lost? Would you go out and look for her? Even if you had lots of other toys?” “Oh, yes!” said Brenda’s daddy. “I would look and look until I found her. My little Brenda lamb would be very special to me. I would love her very much.”

Brenda was glad to get into her nice, warm house. She held her lamb up high and yelled, “Hey, everybody! Look who I found!” When Brenda climbed into her nice, warm bed, she had to check her toys one more time. She tapped them on their noses and said, “Baby Doll. Baby Doll. Elephant. Teddy Bear. EASTER LAMB!”

Brenda said, “Dear God, thank you for watching over my little, lost lamb. Thank you for helping me find him.” Then Brenda and her toys all snuggled down and went to sleep.

And that, my fellow sheep, is just how our Lord feels about each one of us – not just when we’re little, but all our whole life along. For the Lord is my shepherd ... and he is your shepherd too.