

“Safe Flocking” – John 10:1-10 – Apr 13, 2008

Well, where to begin with this complex reading from John’s gospel? Several questions jump out at me as I dig into this text, the first of which is, “who is Jesus talking to?”. It would seem to be to the Pharisees, who were investigating how he healed the man who was born blind, but it could have just as easily been to the ever-present bystanders and gawkers. I’m still not really clear just how or why Jesus transitioned from blindness to shepherds and sheep, but I suspect it’s more than just a case of pulling the wool over our eyes.

I think that confusion over to whom Jesus is speaking becomes a bit clearer if we understand the text as having been shuffled a bit, perhaps a page misplaced while being copied by hand many centuries ago. The story flows smoothly in both content and participants when it moves directly from the last verse of Chapter 9 to verse 19 of Chapter 10, and continues to flow smoothly if verses 1-18 follow verse 30 instead of their present location. However, we have the text in its present form, and we’ll look at it as we have it.

Perhaps the most difficult part of working with this text is trying to keep all the images and players straight. We move from bandits and thieves through shepherds, a gatekeeper and even the gate, all the while dipping knee-deep in sheep ... stuff! As long as we’re mixing metaphors, let’s try to take it one image at a time and see if we can unravel this ball of wool.

“...anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit”, Jesus begins. Wait a minute! Never mind the name calling, sticks and stones and thieves and bandits – what does he mean, “[enter] by another way”? What other way? Isn’t the sheepfold supposed to represent the Kingdom? Is it even possible to enter the Kingdom any way other than through Jesus? What about the gatekeeper? Who is that? Is it Jesus? Not here, because in this part of the story it seems pretty clear we’re to see Jesus as the shepherd, so the gatekeeper must be someone else, and if the gatekeeper’s role is to open the gate to let the shepherd (Jesus) in, the gatekeeper could only be God. However, it’s not very comforting to picture God as a gatekeeper who only keeps an eye on the gate, and misses the bandits and thieves sneaking in over the wall.

“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd”. Well, that’s a clear image, at least, and the implication of entering by the gate conveys a sense of honesty, legitimacy and trust. An image of a leader, one well-known to at least a portion of the flock, who respond to his voice and stream out at his command. Wait a minute ... “out”?! Leading his flock out of safety, out of sanctuary, out of the Kingdom? Oh sure, you can argue that he’s leading them out to pasture, to rich, yummy grass, and that’s a nice image, but does that imply that the Kingdom, or heaven, is inadequate to our needs, and we’ll need to be led out from time to time? It’s hardly a surprise that we hear that even the listeners didn’t understand this figure of speech.

But then at verse 7 the images shimmer and shift, and Jesus now declares, “I am the gate for the sheep.” The gate! Now there’s an image of warmth, of caring, of the personal touch! I guess it’s no wonder that image hasn’t really caught the imagination of people. We often see a bible section title, or banners, or embroidered pillows with “Jesus the good shepherd”, but I can only remember seeing one that said, “Jesus the gate”. Or what about the phrase, “Whoever enters by me will come in, and go out, and find

pasture.” Which is it, come in, or go out? That reminds me more of a cat than a sheep; you know how when you hold the door for a cat they will pause there half in / half out, wanting both and choosing neither?

I know these questions are troubling for you. They’re troubling for me. But I can’t help asking the questions. When I read, “I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits...” the first thing that pops into my mind is “who?” (The second question is “ever consider the origin of the word, ‘crook’, as in shepherd’s crook?”) Who is Jesus talking about when he claims “all who came before me...”? Surely not the patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac and Moses! He couldn’t be talking about the great prophets, Jeremiah, Isaiah, or even the ‘lesser’ prophets such as Amos! Who then were these bandits and thieves who came before him? Misguided or malevolent false messiahs? Probably, but I for one wish it was clearer.

And then there’s the all-time problem of the sheep. It feels ok to think of ourselves as the sheep, especially if we’re like those cute and clever ‘counting sheep’ in the Serta mattress commercials on TV. But when remember the usual image of sheep as being kind of mindless, following blindly along as undiscerning individuals indistinguishable in the midst of the flock from all the others, that’s not a very flattering, or even appealing image, is it?

So how do we make any sense out of this? How can we cut through the confusion and recover the intended message? The answer to that lies in part in recognizing the disruption in the text, and hearing it set against Jesus stating the message loud and clear in what follows, “I am the good shepherd.” If we set this reading against what follows in verse 27, “My sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”, we are no longer in any doubt that we are the sheep of His pasture.

We are the sheep. Ahh, now it comes a bit clearer, even if still not too flattering. Sheep are not the brightest lights in the barn, and they do indeed play an extreme version of “follow-the-leader.” More than that, however, is that sheep are extremely fragile. They are almost as neurotic as people; they can rapidly get sick and die; they frighten easily and can drop from a heart attack; apart from bleating and ineffective kicking they are pretty much defenseless. They require a tremendous amount of care, and require an inordinate amount of skill, knowledge, tenderness, compassion, and outright devotion from the shepherd who looks after them. The shepherd truly has to become one with the flock in order to look after them properly. I was reminded how the people of Jesus’ day understood this even from the language they used: in New Testament Greek the word for ‘shepherd’ and the word for ‘flock’ is essentially the same word (καὶ γενήσονται μία ποίμνη, εἰς ποιμήν) differing only in gender. The shepherd, even though the one responsible for the safety, the well-being, even the life of the sheep, is one with the flock he tends. So, it’s really about safe flocking, or at least safety in the flock. Now this is an image that has stuck with the church and with people of faith over the centuries: a kind, gentle, compassionate, caring Jesus who protects and tends us like a good shepherd tends a flock. Leading us to pastures rich with nourishment for body and soul, summoning us to drink from the waters of life, tucking us securely and safely into the fold at the end of our days. A deeply personal and involved Jesus who knows each one of us the way a shepherd knows each of his sheep.

And if that is the role of the shepherd, what do we hear as being the role of the sheep? The sheep's role is to hear the voice of the shepherd, and to follow. Ahhh, so this is really about discipleship, about following the lead of Jesus, and imitating the other followers of Him. This is about hearing the voice of Jesus calling us to follow in the footsteps of those who have themselves offered kindness, caring, compassion, tenderness and tending as they have followed Jesus. Now it starts to make some sense – Jesus promises us that as the good shepherd He will tend us, look after us, protect us from the dangerous places in life, will patch us up after our curious encounters with the brambles and thorns of life, will carry us back into the company of others when we have lost our way.

Now that doesn't mean we have to be, or even should be, as mindless as sheep. Instead of blindly following others off the edge of the cliff of irrelevance, we have been gifted with the ability to ask questions about where we're going, and whether the path we're following is really the one our Shepherd is asking us to follow Him down. We have the faith and assurance that our Shepherd will poke and prod and pull us with his rod and staff, the Word of God, to keep us in line.

So, while confusing at first glance, this reading begins at last to make sense. If we are listening, if we are hearing, we will understand that this text is about being called to be disciples, to enjoy the security and safety and well-being of being part of the flock belonging to the good shepherd Jesus. We are reassured that we are, and will continue to be, tended to and cared for by the very One who has accepted the responsibility for his flock, the One who would and did lay down His life for them, and for us. Jesus, the good shepherd, assures us that in His keeping we are safe, that with the Father's power in Him He will not let us be snatched away by any person or power. Hear this: the Lord is indeed our Shepherd, and we are the sheep of his pasture.