

“Thieves, Bandits, Sheep, and Shepherd” – John 10:1-10 – May 7, 2017

It's hard to believe, but three years ago this Sunday was my first Sunday back after my heart surgery. A lot has happened in those three years ... at that time we were just about to sign the documents with Bosa for the construction of the new building, and here we are watching it rise and eagerly anticipating being in there a year from now. We have fared quite well, I think, in our temporary facilities, but challenges still arise – not the least of which is scheduling all of the stuff that accompanies a big project. So I was kind of hoping the Lectionary would finally offer a simple, non-challenging text for this Sunday, but naturally, that is not the case. Today's reading from John's gospel is close to the top of the list of scriptural passages that need a great deal of careful scrutiny. When you first read this text it seems simple enough and carrying a message that can trip off the tongue. But the minute you begin to read it carefully and really pay attention to the details the whole passage becomes more and more confusing. Not to despair, however, because with a bit of digging we can not only begin to make some sense of it but also hear a message that is consistent with the message of God's grace that we hear throughout the whole of the Bible.

To help you follow along in that process, let me give you a kind of index or table of contents for this sermon. To begin, I will present to you the details of several confusions that exist in the text. By that time you will probably be wondering why am I doing this, and I assure you it is because I believe that we need to embrace scripture with eyes, mind, and hearts wide open. We are not well served by blindly and deliberately ignoring the problems that are there, and once we deal honestly with those issues then we are able to unwrap and reveal the message of grace that is written there.

So where and how do we begin our digging into this complex reading from John's gospel? Let's start with an easy question, namely “to whom is Jesus speaking?” At first his audience would seem to be to the Pharisees who were investigating how he healed the man who was born blind, but in this setting the listeners could have just as easily been the ever-present bystanders and gawkers. It is not immediately apparent just how or why Jesus jumped so quickly from blindness to shepherds and sheep, but I suspect it's more than just a case of pulling the wool over our eyes.

The best explanation for the confusion over to whom Jesus is speaking starts to come clear if we are willing to recognize the text as having been shuffled a bit, most likely by someone misplacing a page during the process of being copied by hand many centuries ago. (Given the working conditions – often cold and damp rooms dimly lit by candles – such copy errors are not surprising, and there are many examples throughout the texts. The most common is the omission of a line of text by jumping to the next line of text that starts with the same word – so common it even has a name and is called a ‘haplogia.’ Perhaps the most dramatic is the story of the woman caught in adultery that appears in John's gospel but which is more clearly identifiable by its radically different vocabulary and grammar as being more likely a page from Luke's gospel.)

So it is possible that a similar problem has happened here. A lot of the confusion disappears when we note here that the story flows much more smoothly in both content and participants if we cut and paste verses 1-18 of Chapter Ten from the present position to follow immediately after verse 30 of Chapter Ten. When we do this we see the subject shift much more smoothly from the healing of the blind man to the question of sheep following Jesus, and in this context the Pharisees are clearly those to whom Jesus is speaking. However, that's not the way it is as we have the text in its present form, but keep this possible or even likely rearrangement in mind as we work with it.

Now, let's look at more difficult issues, namely trying to keep all the images and players straight. As we progress through this text 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 thus even possible to enter the Kingdom any way other than through Jesus? And what about that 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 sheepfold, 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 those listening to Jesus 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 suspect 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?”) But back to that first question – just 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? Most likely misguided or malevolent false messiahs, 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 loudly and clearly in what follows, “I am the good shepherd.” Remember what I said about this text more naturally following verse 30? When we set this reading beside or after the declaration 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 importantly, 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 – there will be one flock and one shepherd, or better yet, the flock and the shepherd will become one) 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. 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, imitating the other followers of Him, and becoming one with 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 this text really 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 can do so because 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 simple at first glance but confusing when we begin to dig, this reading does at last 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. Thus the simple message has indeed a solid foundation - Hear this: the Lord is indeed our Shepherd, and we are the sheep of his pasture – all thanks be to God.