

Skin in the Game
Rev. Loren McGrail
Irondequoit United Church of Christ
April 25, 2021
Psalm 23
John 10: 11-18



*“I am the good shepherd.
The shepherd lays down his life for the flock.”
John 10:11*

This has been a year marked by many crises including a crisis in authority where we try to discern or decipher between conflicting news reports, scientific studies on everything from global warming to Covid, from racism to voter suppression. Certainly, the events of January 6th showed us on prime-time TV what happens when the people do not follow a “good shepherd.” The question of whose guidance and leadership can we trust still lingers as we try to embrace the best vaccine or sift through dire reports of what will happen to us if we are not able to cut our emissions, or how best to reimagine public safety and police accountability. The question that keeps coming up is whose guidance and leadership should we trust? Whose voice should we listen for or follow?

In both our readings today, Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18, Jesus is identified as the good shepherd, an image that in ancient times was revered and connected to God and leadership. In Ezekiel 34:14-16, God is the Good Shepherd:

*...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,
and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.
I will seek the lost,
and I will bring back the strayed,
and I will bind up the crippled,
and I will strengthen the weak,
and the fat and the strong I will watch over;
I will feed them justice.*

The people knew God as the ultimate shepherd and therefore all of God’s leaders were also referred to as shepherds, the most famous being Moses and King David. If God is the good shepherd, then we are his sheep who are expected to follow. Shepherding stressed the communal nature of the sheep. The singular noun ‘flock’ means one made of many.

It is interesting to note that early Christian art found on plaster-lined walls of tombs in Rome show various scenes of people being rescued. Abraham and Isaac were a favorite and so was Jonah and the whale or Daniel in the lion's den unscathed. We also find John baptizing Jesus along with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. However by far, the most notable image of Jesus for centuries was Jesus as the good shepherd. There are no images of Jesus on the cross or dead. He is alive and doing the work of kin-dom building—binding up the lame, rescuing the wounded and injured, and feeding his flocks. Yes, flocks. In John's Gospel we are reminded that this resurrected Jesus has come to care for all the flocks.

Dear Ones, I would like you to consider, counter to the Hallmark cards of Jesus as the sweet white clothed shepherd, that it was quite provocative for Jesus to call himself a shepherd, to equate himself with God. On the very day that the people are celebrating God's presence in the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus is suggesting that God's presence is in the wilderness, out among the smelly sheep, the wolves, and the bandits. In other words, he, Jesus, is with the outcasts and the spiritually and politically incorrect. Jesus' vocation is to be out in the muck of life and so is ours if we follow the one who knows us already, who has already laid his life down for us.

But the question this morning is do we know him? Do we trust him solely? If we belong to the Shepherd, why do we so easily wander away or get lost? Is it because we fear we are not God's own? If Jesus is so sure we can hear his voice, why do we continue to fear and doubt? What are the barriers that lie between this assurance and our faith? Ah Dear Ones, there are many barriers. The most prominent is that sometimes when we cry out in pain and are met with silence, we feel we have been abandoned by God. Another set of barriers are the ones we have constructed--doctrines and beliefs that say some are welcomed and others not based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, or ethnicity.

Dear Ones, why is it so hard to hear that voice that says, "You belong to me?" Why do we fall so easily for the hirelings, the ones who promise freedom in exchange for our fidelity even if it is against our values of inclusive love for all? Why do we fall for the ones who have no skin in the game except power and greed?

Dear Ones, I would like to end with some questions for you as individuals and as a church to ponder this morning:

- Do you hear the voice of the one calling you by name? How do you know it is God or Jesus' voice?
- When have you experienced that self-sacrificing love in your life? When did it happen? Who was it?
- When have you laid down your life for another? Who have you nurtured or are caring for now?
- How easy or difficult is it for you to embrace that this kind of love is willingly given for another out of love?
- Do you identify more with the hireling or the shepherd? Why?

Now as a church in transition, guided by me, your temporary shepherd, let us use this shepherd framework to look at ourselves as a flock?

- Who are we following? Do you hear the voice? In words? Sacraments? Music? Service?
- Whose voice or voices are we following when we make decisions for the good of the church? How do we know?
- How are we incarnating the love of the Shepherd in the wildest places outside our own lovely temple? How are we incarnating this love in our city of Irondequoit? In the Rochester area? Our denomination? Our country? The world? The planet?
- What other flocks do we acknowledge as part of this one great love? How do we express this extravagant love we have known to others?

Dear Ones, the church proclaims the good news that we loved and not alone, we are now one muddy smelly flock who share a common life led by a shepherd who has skin in the game, ours and theirs. Let us follow.

- Kelly Latimor Icon of Jesus the Good Shepherd