

The Shepherd's Voice
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Fourth Sunday of Easter, RCL Lectionary Easter 4A
April 13, 2008

How many of you have experience with sheep-herding? Not too many, I imagine. My only experience with sheep is at County fairs and petting zoos—and truth be told, at petting zoos it seems the goats are much pushier than the sheep! Regardless, they are far from the cuddly white animals we may imagine them to be—sheep really aren't that clean, they smell, they panic easily. Because of this, and their tendency to be easily led (and their need to be led), we assume that they are rather clueless animals.

However, sheep do know a few things. First and foremost, they know that there is safety in numbers. By staying with the flock, there is a better chance of survival, of finding food and water, of staying safe. Even within a flock, there is a tendency of family units of a ewe and her descendents to stay together, indicating a high level of relationship. Regardless of this, sheep do wander—they are startled into a wrong direction by a perceived or real threat, they are distracted by an inviting patch of grass, or perhaps they just fail to pay attention to their surroundings and their flock. Once alone, they become anxious and stressed, for a lone sheep is, more often than not, vulnerable to injury or attack. Without the others, they cannot find their way.

But sheep not only know they need each other, they know they need a leader—a shepherd. Safety in numbers means little if the numbers do not know where to go to seek food, water and safe passage! A shepherd is one that leads the sheep, looks after them, protects them—building a relationship of trust. The shepherd comes to know the sheep and the sheep come to know the shepherd—a shepherd's face, mannerisms, and most of all, the shepherd's voice and call. A visitor to the Middle East remarked that he was struck by this at an encounter at a watering

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hole—various flocks with their shepherds gathered to quench their thirst, and the sheep intermingled when they came to drink. How in the world, he wondered, would the shepherds ever get them sorted out? And yet, as the shepherds headed back out to the pastures, each called to his flock with a distinctive call—and their flock followed. They knew the voice that they needed to follow, knew their shepherd's call. They did not follow the other shepherds because they did not know them, did not have a relationship with them.

And if sheep know that they need the fellowship of other sheep and the leadership of the shepherd, it may be because they are aware that they **are** in need—in need of protection, in need of food and water, in need of relationship. They are vulnerable and dependent creatures, relying on the good will of a species not their own. They do not hide this, deny it, or try to live against it. They are who they are—sheep.

In today's gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as the shepherd, and likens those who follow him as his sheep. It is perhaps not a comparison that we are altogether comfortable with—for we'd rather think that we are more independent, more self-sufficient, and less needy than sheep. We like to think of ourselves as leaders, not followers; as courageous, not skittish. To be called a 'sheep' in today's society is hardly a compliment. But Jesus does not use this illustration to insult or belittle us—he uses it to point out a very real truth: we are more like sheep than we'd care to admit.

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Like sheep, we need to be in the company of others. The early Christian community as described in the Acts reading for today was well-aware of this: for “they spent much time together”—worshipping, breaking bread, sharing possessions in common. They knew that the strength of their faith lay in being with others of the same community. Even the earliest humans recognized the need to be in community: it was easier as a group to provide food and shelter and protection for the species than to try to go it alone. The need for fellowship, for relationship, is not only ingrained in us, it is necessary to our survival. After all, we are not born to be self-sufficient beings—at least not for many years. Infants deprived of love and caring and touch fail to thrive, even to the point of death. Relationship is key to our very being—relationship with each other, and our Creator, our Savior.

And yet, even as central as relationship is, we all too often ‘wander off’ as a sheep does. Pain or fear can cause us to push others away, and lead us down a lonely, often rocky road. We are enticed by things that we think are easier or better to be in relationship with—possessions, a job, an addictive substance or behavior. These, we think, we can control—and yet, they wind up controlling us. Or we may take our relationships for granted, neglect them, wind up using persons for our own gain—and thus damage our families, our communities, ourselves. And when we find ourselves in these places, and most importantly, realize we have wandered far from home, we may realize something else—we need a leader.

However, it is important not to follow just any leader—just like sheep, we need a leader who cares for us, who knows us, and is willing to save us. We require a leader who shows us the way,

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who paves the way to how we are called to live. We long for a leader who knows the green pastures of love, the well of living water, one in whom we can cry out to when all seems dark and confusing. Jesus promises to be that leader for us—steady and sure, compassionate, one who puts the welfare of the flock ahead of his own. A leader who sacrifices, who promises to always be with us. A leader, a shepherd, in whom we fully trust, in whom we can have faith.

In order to be able to follow Jesus as leader, we need to know his voice above all the voices of this world that clamor for our attention. We are invited to spend time getting to know him, in scripture and prayer and worship, learning his nature, his words, his voice that whispers inside of us whenever we can still our hearts and minds long enough to listen. We learn to recognize his guiding actions in the circumstances and people present in our lives. And as we grow in trust and faith, we learn to follow, knowing that even if the way seems difficult we are not alone, for the One who died for us goes before us into new life, and will lead us there.

Embracing all of this means acknowledging that we too, like sheep, are vulnerable creatures, dependent on a giving, forgiving God. It is not always a comfortable place to be—often we do try to hide it, deny it, or live against it. But to do so is to deny our very nature, our status as children of God. Now pay attention and listen: Children of God—not “grown-up, can do it all alone” persons of God—but Children. Dependent, vulnerable—like sheep.

No one, perhaps, needs more reminding of that than the ordained clergy. Often referred to as pastors, and at times feeling like we responsible for the welfare of our ‘flock’, it is easy to forget

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that we too are sheep. Thankfully, we have a bishop who not only has a sense of humor but also remembers who the true Shepherd is—and it's not us. For an ordination gift, Bishop Cancell gave each new priest a drawing*—and as you will see, we may be sheep with collars, but we are still sheep.

So, fellow sheep, listen for your Shepherd's voice, and don't be afraid to follow. He will lead us home.

Amen.

*Drawing shows a drawing of a flock of sheep, with one sheep wearing a collar and a T-shirt that says 'Staff'.