

Sermon Year B Easter 4
May 7, 2006
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC
The Rev. Jeanne Finan

Sometimes you're the shepherd, sometimes you're the sheep

There is an old Mary Chapin Carpenter song with this line:

Sometimes you're the windshield
Sometimes you're the bug.

I have been thinking about that song,
as I have been thinking about the scripture readings we heard this morning,
thinking about them with a variation of that song line...

Sometimes you're the shepherd
Sometimes you're the sheep.

The prophet Ezekiel doesn't have anything nice to say about the "shepherds of Israel."

He lets us know. in no uncertain terms,
that God is not happy with how these shepherds are behaving.

Who are these shepherds of Israel?

They are the priests, the community leaders,
the people with affluence and influence.

Ezekiel lets them know that God sees what is happening.

God is not happy
that these leaders let the poor and the weak and the sick
suffer and go hungry
while these "shepherds" live lives of plenty.

God is not happy
that these leaders are not healing the sick, not searching for the lost,
not protecting the innocent from the dangers of the world.

God is not happy
because God has noticed
that the shepherds of Israel
take care of themselves quite well.

They eat well.
They clothe themselves very well.
Life is good if you are a shepherd.
Life is not so good if you are a sheep.

Ezekiel brings bad news to these shepherds,
these folks who have been balancing their budgets and their lives
on the backs of others.

The bad news is this:
God has had enough
and the shepherds are about to become the bugs on God's windshield.

The life of the sheep
is very different in Psalm 23.
If the Lord is my shepherd,
well, being a sheep is going to be a very good thing.

I get to lie down in green pastures,
and be led beside still waters;
my soul will be revived
and goodness and mercy will follow me
all the days of my life.
It sounds like sheep paradise, doesn't it?
God knows how to do the shepherd thing right!
Okay, I will definitely be a twenty-third psalm sheep.
Lead and I will follow!

Now in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles,
it really won't matter if we choose to be sheep or shepherd.
The apostles are determined
to erase those divisions,
those divisions that make some people the bugs
and some people the windshields.

The Holy Spirit has blown into town
and the followers of Jesus are intent on following God's boldness,
creating a community where no one owns anything privately,
where everything is shared.

What we hear in this reading is that "there is not a needy person among them,"
because they shared everything they had.

Wow!

Imagine that.

Imagine being so filled with the love of God,
imagine trusting God so completely, so totally,
that you don't feel the need to "own" anything,
There is no desire to put away those few extra coins for a rainy day.
Or buy your own house
or hold on to that piece of property your grandmother left you.

You joyfully sell everything and give the money—all of it—to the community.
Wow.
(There's a stewardship committee's dream come true!)

But I have to tell you, I have to be honest and say,
it is really easier for me to imagine life as a sheep
than a life lived like this community of the apostles in Acts.
A life where it just does not matter
if we are the shepherd or the sheep.
Prestige, money, power, control—
these early Christians have let go of it all.
They have laid down their lives.

And then there is the gospel reading.
Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd."
And Jesus is telling his disciples—both then and now—how a good shepherd acts.
A good shepherd protects the sheep.
A good shepherd doesn't desert the sheep when the going gets rough.
A good shepherd loves all the sheep.

A good shepherd loves his—or her—sheep so much,
that the shepherd is willing to die for those sheep.

Now that is good news for us,
if we are the sheep, right?
The shepherd is going to take care of us.
The shepherd is even willing to die for us.
The shepherd will never leave us.

But what if we are called to be shepherds?
Then that prospect is a little more frightening.
Will we be able to live into that good shepherd that Jesus models
in John's gospel?
Or will we fall into the bad shepherd mode,
the one we heard about from the prophet Ezekiel?

I believe that we, as people who have so much,
can so easily forget those who have so little,
those whose lives are so much more difficult than our own.

We don't mean to do that—
we just don't see those lost sheep.

They are not our neighbors
because they generally cannot afford to live in our neighborhoods.

Or sometimes they are our neighbors,
and, out of shame or fear or denial or illness or grief,
they hide from us, they disappear.
And we never even miss them.

The lost sheep are just that—lost.
They stay well-hidden in our daily world--
the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the abused, the sick--
those who live lives of quiet desperation.

But God throughout the centuries has called
and keeps calling us to remember,
to stretch out our hands,
to listen, to open our eyes and our hearts,
to pray
and to follow where God leads.

Old Testament, New Testament...
the path we are to follow is clearly the same.

And if that means that we need outreach committees and mission committees
and Episcopal Relief and Development organizations and prayer chains
and Friends of St. Mary's to remind us,
to help us to remember,
good!

That is good news!
That means the church is still alive in the world.

We need to be reminded that being alive in this world
is not just about us.

We cannot put on the mind of Christ
if we only take care of ourselves.

If we always put ourselves ahead of others, at the expense of others,
then, we, like the shepherds of Israel,
will suffocate from our own self-indulgence.

In the movie *Babe*,
Babe—a pig—takes on the unlikely role of a shepherd.
This is not to compare Jesus--
or even you and I -- to pigs.

But there are two things we can learn from this little pig named Babe,
two things we can learn about being good shepherds
in the world.

You see, the sheep come to know and trust Babe's voice,
to know and trust Babe's leadership,
because of two things.

First, the sheep know that Babe really cares about them.
There is an unexplainable and unconditional love there.
Why would a pig love sheep?

And second, Babe takes the time to learn the language of the sheep.

This is why outreach and mission and prayer cannot be accomplished
or sustained
by just sending a check.

No one buys their position as a good shepherd.
Yes, money is important
and money is needed to do God's work—undoubtedly.
But God asks so much more of us.

We are asked to lay down our lives.
To lay down our lives.

This means taking some personal and corporate risks,
risks that will move us more deeply into relationship with others,
especially those who are different than us.

Laying down our lives
means giving up some of our own desires
so that we might meet some of the needs of others.

Laying down our lives
means working to change windshields into windows,
opening up possibilities for the sheep as well as the shepherds.

We are a long way from being one flock.
But we are never a long way from the love of the one we know as the Good Shepherd.