

Sermon Date 4-13-08  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
*John 10:1-10*

When I was 22 years old, I was a member of a Roman Catholic religious order – the Franciscans. That particular summer, I was sent from our community in Detroit to one of our “missions” in New Mexico. While there, I had an opportunity to visit some of my fellow classmates who were living on a Navajo reservation in Arizona. On Saturday afternoon a neighbor came by and invited the four of us to come over at 6:30 am the next morning to help with their sheep. I was excited about this because I had never been around sheep and thought it would be a great learning experience to work with some real live shepherds. I had many biblical images running through my mind about Jesus and sheep – you know, the warm fuzzy feelings about Jesus being a shepherd, protecting us and loving us. I thought it was fitting that we would be out there at sunrise on a Sunday morning. How perfect!

Our hostess and her 5 children met us at the appointed time at the sheep pen. She opened the gate and motioned us in. The four of us entered talking as we went in. The sheep immediately ran away from us. When the shepherdess and her children came in, however, and began talking to the sheep, the animals came toward them. Our hostess then instructed the four of us to select a sheep, pick it up and carry it out of the pen. Startled, the four of us looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders and tried to go about the task. It must have been funny to watch because every sheep we tried to approach ran away from us. We could hear the children laughing behind us. After what seemed like an eternity of continual failures, and bruised egos, a teenage boy of about 14 or 15 darted past us, jumped into the air and tackled one of the sheep. He picked himself up and placed the animal over his shoulders holding two legs in either hand. He walked out of the pen and all of us followed him to a place around the shed.

There we faced two large poles springing up from the ground and a crossbeam between them. The boy put the sheep down underneath the crossbar and his sister hurriedly approached with rope and nimbly tied the sheep’s feet together. The boy threw the other end of the rope over the crossbeam, pulled the sheep up into the air and tied off the rope on peg mounted on one of the pillars. Out of nowhere, this old Navajo woman, hunched over and wearing a blanket around her shoulders, walked slowly toward the swinging animal that had just stopped its bellowing. Without uttering a word the grandmother, flung off the blanket and stood upright with a gleaming knife in her hand. She quickly cut the sheep’s throat and within a matter of minutes she had completely butchered the animal and the teenage boy placed the meat into a cooler of ice and the hide was placed over the crossbar to dry. The dogs lapped up the blood and the family jumped into the back of a pickup truck with the cooler of meat and drove away.

Dumbfounded, the four of us stood alone staring at one another, not knowing what to say. We later found out that the family was going to visit relatives in another village and they were taking food for the family gathering.

My city boy image of sheep and shepherds was drastically altered in that instant. From that day forward I have had a difficult time imagining myself as a sheep and Jesus as a shepherd. I didn't want to end up like that sheep!

Yet, this is the reality of the relationship between sheep and shepherd. In biblical times sheep provided many of the necessities of life: milk, meat, hides and wool, and horns that were used for musical instruments or as containers to store things such as oil. The fat tail was considered a delicacy and was sometimes required as a sacrifice.

Sheep are mentioned in the Bible more than five hundred times.

While most of the sheep references in the OT are literal – practically all references in the NT are metaphors comparing the relationship of Christ and his followers to that of the shepherd and his flock.

Our gospel this morning ends at verse 10, but in the very next line, Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd”. Most of us probably remember this metaphor, but that is not part of our story today. We will hear that lesson next year on this Fourth Sunday of Easter – so please come back for the sequel!

Returning to today's reading, Jesus is depicted as the gate into and out of the sheepfold.

We hear Jesus say, “Very truly I tell you, I AM the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were bandits and thieves, but the sheep did not listen to them. I AM the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved. This echoes John's message throughout this gospel that Jesus is the Son of God and it is only through him that there is salvation and eternal life.

Jesus also says in this passage that the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out of the pen and they follow him because they know his voice. The sheep will not follow strangers, but will run away because they do not recognize the voice. This was certainly true in my experience of entering the sheepfold.

This was important back in that day because there were typically several different flocks safeguarded within each enclosure. So when the various shepherds came to gather their sheep, there had to be some way of sorting one flock from another.

I wonder if the sheep had a choice in which shepherd they listened to. Could they have ignored the voice of their shepherd and intentionally followed another? Or are they “hard-wired” to follow only the voice that is imprinted within them? Maybe they just stick with their small family sheep unit and go wherever the others go. In any case, there seems to be frequent opportunities for sheep to follow different voices.

What are the competing voices that we hear today? We listen to different perspectives from various politicians and governmental leaders who say that we should follow their lead because they know how to protect us and take care of our needs.

Advertising and marketing campaigns bombard us daily with seductive messages that strive to sway us in their direction and purchase whatever products or services they are hawking. The accumulation of wealth and things is a never ending goal in our consumption driven economy.

We absorb the many societal voices that tell us how we should look, feel, think, act and live. Mostly these are self-centered views that encourage us to pursue these values and appearances for our personal benefit.

Hardly ever do we hear voices calling us to be aware of and look out for our neighbors, both near and far. If our attention is drawn to the plight of the poor, the outcasts and the victims in our world, we are easily overwhelmed and paralyzed by the enormity of the problem.

It becomes easier to listen to the voices of those other shepherds and follow them to greener pastures where we will enjoy the riches of the land and have more than we need!

All these different shepherds have their own agendas and speak in distinctive tones. They will use the sheep that follow them for their own purposes, gain and livelihood.

John, on the other hand, is saying that Christ is the shepherd who creates a new community over and against the bankrupt structure and system of Judaism and Roman imperialism. Jesus presents an alternative vision for our lives. One in which we are in right relationship with all people, creation and God.

If we play into the NT biblical metaphor that we are sheep, which gate will we go through and which shepherd will we follow?

AMEN.