

Sheep Story -- Easter 4C

Here we go again with the lambs and the sheep. I thought we were here to discuss divinity, not uvinity, yet each one of our passages returns to the subject of *les moutons*. Why is this insistent metaphor so oft employed in holy scripture? What is it with God's Word and sheep? Briefly, sheep are powerfully driven by their instincts, and they are in dire need of direction in order to thrive. Sound familiar?

John's gospel gets off to a pretty heady start for us thinker-types: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Now that makes sense. If you tell me that the perfect words will gain me access to godliness, that all I have to do is express myself properly, explain my position convincingly, explicate my ideas articulately enough and I'll be on my way; I will prevail, I am all for that, oh ya. But then I remember that words themselves are all metaphors; interpretations of the thing or idea they are meant to convey. So there is no possible perfection of expression, any more than there is perfection in any other realm. There is only intention.

One thing we have to do is to put the writings and ourselves in context. When these stories first came to be told and retold, remembered and recorded, most everyone had daily contact with the sheep and goats that sustained them. As is still the case in numerous

cultures, the animals were precious and central to human existence. Dowries were given in goats; they still are. Sheep provides clothing, milk and cheese and, on very special occasions meat for religious sacrifice and food. Be ye sure that everyone had a direct economic and spiritual connection with the even-toed ungulate.

How hard is it for us modern people to relate to this sense of interdependence. Without a good shepherd, the sheep themselves would be mere lion- or wolf-bait, and our investment would be squandered too. Without the sheep, the shepherd would be naked, hungry and ungodly. Perhaps especially in our country -- where pride in ourselves is a central cultural theme -- is it difficult to think about, let alone embrace interdependence between ourselves and anything or anybody. Certainly not sheep.

It takes hard work to recognize ourselves in this metaphorical imagery, to identify ourselves as creatures with instincts in need of leadership. We have to do some counterintuitive work and get out from under the burden of our pride if we want to breathe any of the clean fresh air of grace God so freely offers. That's why the teachings of Jesus are so full of paradox: "The last shall be first." It is seemingly foolish wisdom and the experience of submission to God's ecumenical will that characterizes the Way of Jesus. It is dying to self that is so central to our identity as followers. We must be as children in order to become wise. All comes from and is

ultimately controlled by God, yet we each have to make vital choices all the time. Surrender to win. We need practice in 'just saying yes.'

How do we become sheep? Perhaps we say, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief." Instead of, "Well I would like to have stronger faith, but under the circumstances, I guess I'm doing pretty well." We might have to pray to want to pray to want to pray to want to pray. Sooner or later, our unbelief will get exhausted, and the clean robe will fall on our shoulders like a cloud. The yoke is easy; the burden is light. The meaning of Jesus dwelling among us as our shepherd is contained in the hearts and relationships each of us pursues. We are Christ's hands and feet and voices in the World. Are we those who seek for one another what we most want for ourselves? Are we known by our love?

When Jesus tells the temple leaders, 'You all just don't get it, because you're not my sheep.' He's not excluding them, he's merely identifying them. 'Of course you don't get it, because you don't want to be as children; you can't submit; you are unwilling to be led; you are always playing to win. I'm not going to make you do it, though I could...' This was said, perhaps, with a shrug, as if to an angry, self-righteous child: (I'm here when you want to talk.)

No, no one is to be excluded, ever. All are called, but not all are self-chosen. As John Chrysostom wrote, "They don't believe, not because Jesus is not a shepherd, but

because they are not sheep.” Belief is an inside job. The great Ghandi once said he had three enemies: the first, and by far the most easily changed for the better, was the British Empire; the second, which was far more difficult, was the Indian people; and the third was Mohandas K Ghandi (himself). With him he had very little influence at all.

Today we saw that the disciples were possessed of the same power to raise the dead as Jesus, at least briefly. So Tabitha wakes up for Peter. Tabitha – which means Gazelle – aka Dorcas (although Tabitha is a much nicer name), Tabitha’s experience becomes a metaphor for the Holy Spirit dwelling among the believers. Jesus said, “*Talitha Cum,*” ‘Little girl, get up.’ Peter says, “*Tabitha, Cum,*” ‘Tabitha, get up.’ The power of the risen Christ is not just an isolated historical incident, but an ongoing source of nurture. We are each other’s shepherds and healers; we are each other’s sheep, as long as we both shall live. Every community has the opportunity, by caring for one another, to live out this belief. Our mutual healing is not going to take the dramatic form of bringing people literally back from the grave – at least not very often. But there are myriad spiritual, emotional and vocational graves we find ourselves wallowing in that only the comfort, understanding and support of our friends will help us escape. Jesus came not to abolish the human condition, but to transform it. Each time we show love to one another, we are the living proof of his work.