
Child of God
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
May 3, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

Every year at about this time of year, United Church ministers all get to play a fun game. That game is seeing what day the United Church selects to call “Camping Sunday”, and to see how that ties in with the lectionary readings for the day. The lectionary is determined by an International group, and Camping Sunday is a North American idea, so the readings do not usually align very well. The game for ministers is trying to make it work out.

This year, “Camping Sunday” was declared to be last week, but often, the celebration of camping happens when the lectionary gives us the readings we just read. And every year I have to chuckle. Because if it’s Camping Sunday then I would expect the readings to be about sleeping in the rain, or running out of food, or dropping something valuable in a lake, or perhaps about mosquitos and black flies. Some people think that camping is a form of torture, and when they setup their tent, it looks something like this:

[slide: tent]

By that way, I found that image online - that is not one of MY holidays snaps. But certainly Marjorie and I have done enough camping together - even on a motorcycle - and we know that you just can’t have a camping story without having stories about being hungry, miserable, and uncomfortable. And yet today we have been given stories about comfort.

Take the 23rd Psalm for example. It’s not about being uncomfortable, it reads more like a story of comfort. And of course we use it that way. The 23rd Psalm is present in one form or another at many funeral services for that very reason. And the story in John where Jesus says he is the good shepherd, which implies that Jesus is taking care of us is often seen as a story of comfort and peace. Perhaps today should be called

[slide: bleating heart sunday]

“Bleating Heart Sunday” instead. Or, what about, “The Kingdom of God and Ewe”.

[slide: the kingdom of god and ewe]

Now you don't expect me to complain about an emphasis on shepherds in the Bible. I figure that shepherds should have all the air-time they want. But I do wonder about the imagery and what it means for us today. Let's do a quick survey. How many of us have a pet sheep at home? How many of us grew up with sheep? I really wish we were meeting in person today so that I could hear your answers, so please stay for coffee time after service. Some members here do live on farms after all. And Cindy shared a truly delightful story with me this week about her bringing a lamb to worship once. Perhaps taking care of sheep is a part of your day-to-day life. Personally, I'm not sure I've even touched a sheep that was not at the Royal Winter Fair, or connected to a tourist attraction. For some of us, our closest contact with sheep is limited to when we knit.

Or perhaps I'm just the new guy in town and I don't realize that this congregation knows all about sheep. Perhaps at Sydenham-Heritage we make a big deal every year on the last Saturday in October, known as "International Hug a Sheep Day".

[slide: sheep hug]

Presumably in the story about shepherds and sheep, Jesus is the shepherd, so logically, we must be the sheep. But what do we know about sheep? What is commonly known about sheep is that they smell and they are not too intelligent. But neither of those characteristics help me relate to the metaphor. I have also heard that sheep are friendly and sociable, which is an easy metaphor to embrace. We can all embrace that metaphor, or embrace a sheep itself if you have one handy.

[slide: more sheep hugs]

But perhaps our lack of knowledge about sheep is overshadowed by our lack of knowledge about shepherds. I don't know about you, but my image of a shepherd comes from the text we just read, and from the many paintings you still see in churches - with Jesus caring for a young sheep or perhaps watching over a group of sheep. Here's one:

[slide: jesus and sheep]

In many of these images, Jesus has a young sheep draped around his neck, or he is holding one tenderly in his arms. But I've noticed that these images always depict Jesus the shepherd as if he's on a fashion runway. His clothes are clean. His body is clean. His

hair is immaculate. He looks well-rested, well-fed, and relaxed. Face it - the shepherd in these images looks better than we do under COVID-19 restrictions! And the sheep in these images look like pets. It's a very pastoral image of course, an image of comfort, an image of peacefulness.

If you like that image, I don't want to ruin it for you. But we all know - if we think about it - that shepherds 2000 years would have been a bit more "rough around the edges". Shepherds spent most of their time with their flocks. They did not spend much time with other people, and in particular did not spend much time with cultured, educated people, or with the religious elite. They also did not spend a lot of time cleaning and grooming themselves.

So 2000 years ago - when John shared his image of Jesus being like a shepherd, how did the people John was speaking with hear that image? What emotional reaction did the people have to the metaphor of Jesus as a shepherd? Did they find the image comforting and pastoral like we do? Or did they find the image challenging and provocative? I mean, John could have cast Jesus in the image of the high priest - very religiously upright, very well cared-for and immaculate. But instead John cast Jesus in the image of a shepherd. John's use of the shepherd image may even have been designed to irritate the religious elite of his day for that reason. I think it's safe to plead modesty here - and to realize that we do not know what the shepherd image implied to the people who lived in Jesus's day. But my best guess is that it was not an image of comfort to them.

Comparing Jesus to a shepherd 2000 years ago might have been like comparing Jesus to a migrant worker today. Perhaps it was a challenge to the people and to the religious establishment. And for us, what might a modern version of that image be? I want to share one alternative image for Jesus, from the book "God is For Real, Man" by Carl F. Burke.

[slide: god is for real man]

This book from 1966 is a collection of "interpretations of Bible passages and stories, as told by some of God's bad-tempered angels with busted halos." In other words, it's a collection of Bible stories as remembered by street kids and told in their own language.

Here's the version of Psalm 23 from the book.

The Lord is Like My Probation Officer

The Lord is like my Probation Officer, he will help me, he tries to help me make it every day. He makes me play it cool. And feel good inside of me. He shows me the right path so I'll have a good record, and he'll have one too. Because I trust him, and that ain't easy, I don't worry too much about what's going to happen. Just knowing he cares about me helps me. He makes sure I have my food And that mom fixes it. He helps her stay sober and that makes me feel good all over. He's a good man, I think, and he is kind; and these things will stay with me. And when I'm kind and good then I know the Lord is with me like the Probation Officer.

[discussion - alternative images for Jesus today] Please share your images over coffee time today, or at Weds morning coffee @ 10:30, or give me a call.

[slide: shepherd in palestine]

Earlier I innocently asked if we might imagine Jesus as a migrant worker. But you should know by now that I never ask innocent questions. I picked "migrant worker" as a possible image for Jesus on purpose. Because with our situation around COVID-19, migrant workers - who traditionally we think of like shepherds, not very clean, not socially acceptable - are now doing great service for us as one of our great needs today is picking vegetables in the fields of Southern Ontario. A job that most Canadians think of as "below them" is all of a sudden vitally important for our survival and comfort. Migrant workers may come to be seen as our saviours, even as we continue to undervalue, under-pay and under-protect them. On Thursday, I read that grocery store workers in Ontario are now eligible for free child care. I think grocery store workers have not traditionally been seen with a lot of respect either. And yet they too may come to be seen as our saviours. COVID-10 is taking our traditional image of who is important in society and turning that on its head. And that's the type of challenge I think John's community faced when John gave them the image of Jesus as s shepherd. The image was radical. It was

transformative. It was not comforting.

The story of the good shepherd always reminds me of the story of the good samaritan. And those stories are not just connected by the word “good”. Because even though we like to interpret the image of Jesus as “shepherd” as an image of comfort and support, I believe that the image of Jesus as a shepherd was scandalous to the people in Jesus’s day. And the story of the good samaritan is scandalous too. Because the message of the good samaritan is not that we should help other people, but rather, that God appears in unlikely places, in surprising places. God turns our prejudices and expectations upside down.

We call it the “good samaritan” story because a Samaritan - an outsiders - does something good for a victim. We sometimes gloss over the word Samaritan altogether, and think the story is just a “pay it forward” message. But the point of the story for Jesus’s audience was not that. The point requires the first part of the story where the priest and the levite walked past the victim because they did not want to dirty their own hands helping the victim.

[slide: bad minister]

The point of the good samaritan story is not that we should help the person who was robbed and wounded - although obviously we should. The point of the story was how “righteous”, “religious”, “trained” people who should know better often fail to act out the gospel, while those people we consider outsiders, outcasts, and strangers sometimes live out the gospel without hesitation. The message is that we should watch out for the lowly, the dubious, the suspicious in our midst - not because we need to defend ourselves from them but because God is probably already at work within them, in their midst, in our midst. Perhaps even in people like shepherds, migrant workers, and grocery store employees.

[slide: day]

I’m reminded of Dorothy Day, an American journalist, social activist, and Roman Catholic - someone also considered by some to be an anarchist - someone also considered by many to be the good samaritan incarnate. In the 1930’s, Day, along with Peter Maurin established the “Catholic Worker Movement”, a non-violent pacifist movement that

provided care for the poor and the homeless.

There is a story about Robert Coles going to interview Dorothy Day in 1952. I quote, “Upon entering her ‘house of hospitality’ [Coles] found [Day] talking with a woman who was obviously very drunk. Eventually Dorothy got up and came over to Coles: ‘Are you waiting to speak to one of us?’ The troubled, intoxicated woman was not the other, the outsider, ‘one of them’; she was not an object of Dorothy Day's charity. Rather, Day was one with this woman in the charity of Christ.” For Day, what we would call the “outcast” - in this case the drunk woman - was not an object for pity, or an object to be used for an object lesson. She was not an “object” at all. The drunk woman was not a “client”. The drunk woman was not a charity case. The drunk woman was a child of God. No more. No less.

[slide: sheep]

These stories always sound so simple. But of course, the real trick is to actually live out this vision. I think that deep down we all know that creating the kingdom of God on earth requires action, not just words. Words are important too of course. But how many of us have ever become more fit because we talked about exercising? How many of us have ever lost weight because we talked about going on a diet. How many of us ever enjoyed new sights and new cultures because we talked about going on a trip?

The kingdom of God is right outside our own door. We only have to walk out the door and engage with others. Perhaps those “others” will smell like shepherds. It doesn't matter. Because whoever you engage with - like you - is a child of God.

I end a lot of sermons with a call to action to go out and engage with other people in your midst. Well, perhaps you don't want to do that right now. So here's another approach. When you watch or read the news, imagine how you would engage with the person in the story. Look to see the humanity of the person. Look to see the divinity of the person. That person is a child of God. And if you struggle to see that, well, then you have some interesting homework this week.

Whether you feel like a shepherd or a sheep, remember, you are not alone. You are a child of God.

Amen.