

“All is a Miracle: The Good Shepherd in Three Parts”

John 10:11-18

April 25, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Easter

In John’s Gospel, figures of speech are used to illustrate the benevolent nature of Jesus Christ. In Chapter 10, Jesus is first described as the “gate” to relationship with God. In the passage that follows, Jesus is said to be the “good shepherd” who looks after the people of God, leading them, protecting them, and laying down his life for them. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church in John 10:11-18:

[Jesus said:] “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary. A hired man is not a real shepherd. The sheep mean nothing to him. He sees a wolf come and runs for it, leaving the sheep to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf. He’s only in it for the money. The sheep don’t matter to him.

“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. In the same way, the Father knows me and I know the Father. I put the sheep before myself, sacrificing myself if necessary. You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them, too. They’ll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one Shepherd. This is why the Father loves me: because I freely lay down my life. And so I am free to take it up again. No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own free will. I have the right to lay it down; I also have the right to take it up again. I received this authority personally from my Father.”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

PART ONE: THE GOOD SHEPHERD

“You must hurry,” friends cried to the Teacher as he rushed home from the fields. “The banquet at the home of the Mayor has already begun. You are late.”

They are right, thought the Teacher. *If I take the time to change my clothes, I could miss the entire dinner.* Instead of returning home he proceeded in his work clothes to the home of the Mayor, a rich man. But when he arrived the servants at the door refused him entry because he was not dressed properly. His protests were to no avail.

Finally, the Teacher knocked on a neighboring door, explained his predicament, and was offered an acceptable jacket to wear to the Mayor’s dinner. He quickly returned to the estate and was escorted to the dining table.

When the meal was served, the Teacher began to put the food on his coat. He smeared vegetables on the jacket and poured the appetizer in his pocket. All the time he said loudly, "Eat, dear dinner jacket! I hope you are enjoying the meal."

All the guests turned to look at him. The Mayor, flummoxed by the Teacher's behavior, asked him why on earth was he putting food on the jacket and telling it to enjoy the meal?

"When I arrived in my work clothes," the Teacher explained, "I was refused entrance. It was only when I was accompanied by this fine coat that I was allowed to sit at the table. Naturally I assume that it was the jacket, not me, that was invited to your banquet."

(William R. White, *Stories for the Journey: A Sourcebook for Christian Storytellers: "A Party for Coats"*)

A Good Shepherd prioritizes relationships over appearances. God invites us to the most amazing dinner party where the food is sumptuous and plentiful, where the wine flows freely, and best of all, where you come as you are and are immediately and enthusiastically accepted. Why would we ever turn down such an invitation?

Moses was tending his father-in-law Jethro's sheep one day when one of them strayed off. He left the flock and went to look for the missing lamb. Upon finding her, he hoisted the scared animal up onto his shoulders, draping her around his neck. On his way back to join the rest of the sheep, he came across a burning bush with no obvious source of fire.

A voice spoke to him: "Moses, remove your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground." This was the beginning of Moses' call as God's instrument of liberation, when God took him from being a literal shepherd to being a shepherd who would lead God's people away from Pharaoh to the Promised Land.

While Moses was one of many shepherds called by God in Old Testament times, Jesus is the undisputed Good Shepherd of the New Testament. Jesus' use of the Greek word to describe himself, *kalos*, is translated to mean many things implying that which is "ordered, sound, noble, ideal, model, true, competent, faithful, and praiseworthy. He is not just any run-of-the mill shepherd; he embodies strength, power, sympathy, kindness, and mercy." (Barbara J. Essex, *Feasting on the Word: John 10:11-18*). He is distinguished from a mere "hired hand" who walks away from the flock at the first sign of trouble; Jesus assures us that he is here for us, for the long-haul, leading us and sheltering us as our good shepherd.

Are we the dinner host who sets standards for who will be let into our dinner party? Are we the guest who is either welcomed as we come or turned away because we are not the right type of guest? Are we hired hands who walk away when the going gets rough or good shepherds who will protect with our very lives the Word of God? Jesus wants to know just how serious we are about his message.

PART TWO: TENDING THE FLOCK

A little boy came home from school with a drawing he'd made in class. He danced into the kitchen, where his parent was preparing dinner.

"Guess what?" he squealed, waving the drawing. His parent never looked up. "What?" his parent said, tending to the pots.

"*Guess what?*" the child repeated, waving the drawing back and forth. "*What?*" his busy parent said, tending to the plates.

"*You're not listening to me!*" the boy cried. "Yes, I am, Son," said his parent, exasperated with the boy's insistence on attention. Said the child to his parent, "You're not listening with your *eyes*." (Mitch Albom, *Have a Little Faith*)

Part of being a good shepherd to the flock is about engagement. A hired hand does the bare minimum in leading the flock to food and water. With the noontday sun, the hired hand settles up against a tree in the cool shade and drifts off to sleep. When the wolves come, the hired hand is unprepared to fend them off.

So, too, when we ignore our most important relationships, those we have with our Beloved, our family, our friends, and our God. It is important to teach the children about God's love and direction; it is vital to model God's love for them and for those we are blessed to know in our lives. But this is a very inward-looking list, for God defines "the flock" not only to include those we claim as our own, but to those no one claims as their own, the sheep on the fringes that are the first to be picked off by the wolves of our society.

My friend called me the other day after having been diverted through downtown Denver on his way home to Parker from the north side of the city. "Have you been down Broadway lately?" he asked me. "I can't believe the tent city that has sprung up in Civic Center Park!!"

Who wants to go *there*? I remember Daddy Bruce and how he fed the homeless of Denver for decades from his little barbeque business in what used to be called Five Points. He was the good shepherd for so many and his presence, though remembered, is sorely missed nowadays. I wonder what our elected officials think as they drive to the Capitol for their legislative sessions and work conferences? Do they even see the tent city anymore or has it become just part of the landscape?

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PART THREE: TAMING THE WOLF

St. Francis loved all animals, even the lowliest worms. It would take him a long time to walk anywhere after the rain, because he stopped to move every one of them off the pathway so they wouldn't get stepped on. He named and fed every rodent who shared his monastic cell. It is said that larks sang to him on the night of his death.

In the town of Gubbio where St. Francis once visited, a wolf terrorized animals and humans alike, wounding and killing them when she could. Sticks and clubs were no match for her sharp teeth. The holy man was warned not to go outside the village gates where the wolf preyed on unsuspecting travelers. But St. Francis said to the concerned townspeople, "Jesus Christ is the shepherd of all creatures."

Off he went and sure enough, the wolf came at him at full pace, her mouth wide open. St. Francis called out to her, "Sister wolf! In the name of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, I order you not to hurt me or anyone." As he made the sign of the cross, the wolf stopped running and laid at the saint's feet like a lamb.

"Sister Wolf," said Francis, "you have done great harm in this region and you have committed horrible crimes by destroying God's creatures without any mercy. You have killed human beings who have been created like you in the image of God. You deserve to be treated like a murderer and be put to death. This whole town is your enemy. But Sister Wolf, I want to make peace between you and the people of Gubbio."

The wolf raised her head and in a gesture of peace accepted his pets and ear scratches. Francis continued: "Sister Wolf, since you are willing to keep the peace, I promise that the people of this town will feed you each day so you and your pups need never suffer from hunger again, for I know that whatever you have been doing is because you and your little ones are very hungry. At the same time, Sister Wolf, I

want you to promise you will never again hurt the town animals or human beings. Do you promise?"

The wolf nodded her head, promising to do what the saint asked and offering her paw as a sign of the peace they had made that day. Then the wolf followed St. Francis into town like a gentle lamb. People gathered in amazement to see the strange sight. As a sign of peace with the people and creatures of Gubbio, the wolf raised her paw once again and placed it into Francis' upturned palm.

Both the people of Gubbio and the wolf kept the pact that Francis made. The wolf went door to door for food and hurt no one. People fed it courteously and it is said that not a single dog barked at her. Two years later the wolf died. The people of Gubbio mourned the loss of their new friend because the peaceful nature of the wolf reminded them of the time St. Francis brought peace to their town. (William R. White, *Stories for the Journey: A Sourcebook for Christian Storytellers: St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio*)

The wolf also needs to eat and feed her young. She is part of the circle of life. Jesus does not condemn the wolves; rather, he acknowledges them as a necessary element in his story. Whereas a hired hand does not care how many of the sheep in the flock get picked off, the good shepherd grieves every single loss even as the good shepherd blesses the life of the marauding wolf.

We have wolves in our lives that threaten us—this is true. Medical conditions, symptoms of advancing age, legal and financial perils, a violent world. These are all things that keep us wide-eyed awake in the wee hours of the night. There are so many things we worry over that cause us to count our sheep when we should be sleeping and restoring our minds and bodies for the next day.

How can we make peace with the wolves who seem to unmercifully stalk us?

God empowers us to become like good shepherds, aware of the wolves but focused on the flock. We are empowered to use our eyes and ears, our voices and our hands. We have tools and we have the know-how to use them. Jesus taught this lesson to his disciples and the disciples, apostles, and Gospel writers teach us in turn.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk and peace activist, is wise beyond wisdom. This is my favorite lesson of his:

People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle.

There are miracles in every story in our lives: in the way dinner guests grace our lives and teach us about hospitality; in the profound statements of children who are trying to gain our attention; and in the way wolves and humans make peace with one another. Yesterday, our 50- pound Sheepadoodle puppy crawled up onto my chair and into my lap to cuddle me at the end of a particularly tough day. All is a miracle.

Sunday in our sermon talk back, some of us engaged in a deep and personal conversation about the nature of Jesus and the heart of Christianity. With respect and graciousness, we discussed these issues and supported one another's faith journeys. All is a miracle.

Today as the snow melts and the sun shines bright in the sky, the birds sing with the morning, the prairie dogs come out of their burrows to enjoy the warmth above, and the grass drinks in hungrily the new moisture and nourishment. All is a miracle.

That the stories of Jesus have survived lo these 2000 or so years and the Good News has the capacity to welcome the underdressed dinner guest, the child with innocent wisdom, and the wolf with whom we need to make peace, all this is a miracle, too.

May we be the good shepherds of God's compassion, mercy, love and justice.

May we give others grace and extend it to ourselves as well.

May we not turn away from the difficult stories of life but rather, may we be the ones who step into the middle of them as the shepherd moves into the middle of the flock to lead the sheep to safety and sustenance.

All is a miracle-

May It Be So.

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