**Sheep and Good Shepherds**

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Texts: Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

We’ve been together quite a while, you and I. Fifteen years. And you’ve grown to know me pretty well as a preacher. You know how I love to learn, and to bring you interesting insights about Scripture, or about situations in our world that the week’s scripture relates to.

And this week, there are many sources of all kinds of interesting information about these readings—tidbits about the Greek language, the background of the writer, but most of all, of course: sheep. I am somewhat fascinated by sheep. And not just since I started wearing wool every day—I read a book years ago called “A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm” that told me more about sheep that you ever wanted to know. I love sheep.

And as I prepared the service, I kept remembering the time, ten years ago last month, when our son Corey and his now-fiancée Cait, were on spring break from their studies at Oxford University, and I was visiting, so we drove to Scotland, and while there, went to the small island of Iona. As we walked the length of the island, we saw sheep and more sheep. It was spring, so we saw lambs, skipping about with one another in the sunny day on that beautiful little island. And so this is why I chose liturgy from Iona for today, because for me, sheep and Iona will always go together.

But there was another year, three years earlier, when my mother and I were visiting Tyler during his junior semester abroad in Tanzania, and we frequently saw shepherds walking with their sheep, and I realized then, that in the United States we don’t really see shepherds. Our sheep are behind fences. That relationship between a shepherd and his sheep is really not something I had ever seen. And that relationship is really what today’s readings are about. Yes, I have some interesting facts, but I’d rather that we just take a little time to reflect upon this relationship…and upon our own relationship with God, and how that relationship impacts our relationship with everyone and everything else. Because the Bible is all about relationships, and at the center is God and God’s relationship with creation, and with us.

And the shepherds in the Bible are also all about relationships. When a shepherd tended his flock, he was all that the flock had to care for them and protect them. And the shepherd didn’t have much either—if you remember the story of David and Goliath, the shepherd boy David refused the loan of the king’s armor when he went out to fight the giant warrior, Goliath. He had tried on the armor, but it didn’t fit. Instead, he chose to rely on his wits and his skills, just as he did in the wild if an animal threatened the flock, he would protect them. As he explained to the king, he had killed lions and bears before, in order to protect his flock. For a shepherd to take on a lion or a bear meant that he was risking his life, to save the lives of his sheep. This is what a shepherd would do.

The 23rd psalm is said to be written by King David, many years removed from his shepherding experience, but the memory is still with him. And as he reflects on the care he has received from God through the years, he feels God’s devotion to him, just as he felt his own devotion to his sheep as a young shepherd. He would tend them, stay with them as they rested in green pastures, lead them to still waters, and protect them from their enemies. He would put his life between them and danger. And he was always with them. He didn’t put them in a pen and walk away. He walked with them, wherever they went, in good and bad weather, keeping them safe, feeding them, and being present to them.

And Jesus was also drawing on the disciples’ familiarity with shepherds. He is saying that this is how much he loves the people. He will do whatever it takes to take care of them…of us.

And now, for an interesting little fact…(I just couldn’t resist): the writer of this Gospel is not only counting on the readers’ familiarity with sheep and shepherds; he is also counting on their familiarity with Scripture. Twice in our portion of the chapter, and four times in the whole chapter, Jesus uses the phrase *ego eimi*, which is Greek for “I am”. As you may remember, in the story of Moses meeting God in Exodus 3, while he is, by the way, tending his father-in-law’s sheep (!), and when he asks God to tell him his name, God says, “I am what I am.” I am. It is no accident that John tells this story, repeating the words again and again. I am…I am… I am…..Jesus is the Good Shepherd…and Jesus is the One who calls himself, “I am.” And Jesus is with us, tending us, staying present to us.

And because of God’s devotion to us, because Jesus is with us, we know that we are loved. And in his letter, John reminds us that because we are loved, we also love others…and not just with our words, but with actions. And our loving actions are for our sake, for God’s sake, for Christ’s sake and for one another’s sake…Jesus reminded us that he has “other sheep” and we know from other passages in the Bible that there are no limits to who is included—our friends and our enemies, humans and animals. Bottom line, it’s not about how much we know, it’s about how much we love, in word and action, without limit. As God loves us.

And we can trust this love, as John reminds us in his letter. Listen again to these important words:

My dear children, let’s not just talk about love; let’s practice real love. This is the only way we’ll know we’re living truly, living in God’s reality. It’s also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.

And friends, once that’s taken care of and we’re no longer accusing or condemning ourselves, we’re bold and free before God! We’re able to stretch our hands out and receive what we asked for because we’re doing what he said, doing what pleases him.

So, my friends, as we reach out freely to others in love, we can freely love ourselves, and this indeed frees us to live boldly in God’s world, in God’s love, loving the world, trusting God’s love for the world to flow to us, in us, around us, and through us, too.

In this Earth Week, as we remember God’s love for us and God’s solidarity with us, which means that God is truly *with* us and *for* us, we can be for ourselves as well, and be truly, freely, and boldly with and for creation too. Amen.