

**July 21, 2024**  
**“Sheep Without a Shepherd”**  
**Jeremiah 23:1-4 / Mark 6:30-34**  
**Pastor Tim**

I don't know about you. Maybe it's just because I'm an introvert, but often – not always, but often I'd say – when I go away some place for vacation – as Amy, Gabe and I just did about a month ago now – or even just for a day or half a day to get away, I mostly want to be left alone. Or want us to be left alone.

The fewer people I have to interact with, or, say, sit anywhere near on the beach, the better.

So I also don't know about you, but if I had gone away to a deserted place – or at least what I expected would be a deserted place – so I could rest awhile ... or if I had gone away to a deserted place with my friends so WE could rest awhile, and it turned out that place wasn't deserted after all, and there were many so people coming and going that we couldn't even sit down to eat ... and then, THEN, we hopped in a boat in search of another deserted place where we could be alone and rest awhile, but somehow the crowds got there before we did ... well, let me just say that compassion would not be my first instinct.

More like bitterness. I doubt that compassion would even be my second or third or fourth instinct. If Amy were with me in this scenario (and believe me, she has been), I would be complaining.

But, as Gerald just read for us, compassion IS Jesus' first instinct. His default, which is one of the many reasons why we turn to Jesus as the very embodiment of Divine love. Just sayin'.

Note the lesson, all by itself, to be found in Jesus' intention, his commitment – here and throughout the Gospels – to get away, to be alone, to rest awhile, as part of his spiritual practice. As part of his self-care.

And so please, PLEASE, also note the lesson to be found in his encouraging his disciples, his friends, to do the same. WE ALL need a regular rhythm of rest in our daily, weekly, ongoing

lives. The rhythm of sabbath to help renew and restore our minds, our spirits, our bodies. Our well-being, our very capacity for love, depends on it.

Jesus knew that. Jesus practiced that. And YET, in spite of his intention in this case, for his sake and on behalf of his disciples, solitude and rest is not at all what they find.

Jesus' reputation has preceded him, and the people caught sight of them leaving in the boat, and so hurried ahead on foot, from all around, so they could meet him where they were headed.

When Jesus and his disciples arrived ashore to what they expected, THIS time, would be a deserted place, Jesus instead "saw a great crowd;" ... "and he had compassion for them," ... "because" ... "they were like sheep without a shepherd."

Sheep without a shepherd. Sheep ... without a shepherd.

Ever feel like that? Scattered? Disoriented? Lost? Afraid? Hungry or thirsty for one thing or another, and unsure how to satisfy that hunger or quench that thirst? Of course you have. You may be feeling that way now. I know I am.

Sheep have long had the reputation of being dumb. And so when we get compared to sheep, as in this story and throughout the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, we might take offense.

But sheep aren't dumb – look it up! What sheep are is dependent. Sheep are vulnerable on their own. Prone to wandering, straying away from the flock in their single-minded pursuit of hunger or thirst. And when alone, small and defenseless against would-be predators.

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way ..." says Isaiah. Because it's true.

And while we obviously have greater capacity for independence, for fending for ourselves, and while our misguided but overarching cultural standard and imperative is independence, freedom, self-sufficiency, self-defense, which leads many of us to think, or at least act, like we are NOT dependent on others, that we are NOT vulnerable on our

own, that we can TAKE CARE of and DEFEND themselves, the God's-honest truth is that we are ALL dependent. From the moment we come into this world to the moment we leave it.

We are INTERdependent, in fact, within the intricate web of Creation. Life, including our lives, depends on that interdependence. Whether we realize and acknowledge it or not.

So understand the sheep metaphor that way. It's a metaphor played out throughout the biblical witness, as much to describe humanity as to try, to TRY, to describe the mystery that is God.

"Know that the HOLY ONE is God. It is God who made us, and we are God's; we are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture."

It's OK to be sheep, friends, because we are all sheep WITH a shepherd. Whether you believe it or not.

And if you know how a shepherd functions, you know that sheep are held with the utmost care and compassion. There is an intimate relationship between shepherd and sheep.

"God, GOD, is my shepherd. I shall not want. God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still waters; God restores my soul. God leads me in right paths ... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me – PURSUE me! – all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of God my whole life long." (Psalm 23)

And if you know how a shepherd functions, you know that sheep are held as integral members of the flock. Like members of a family.

"What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray." (Matthew 18:12-13)

If you were here last week, you heard me say that we saw lots and lots and lots and lots of sheep on our recent vacation. Mostly in Ireland, but also in Scotland. So many sheep!

We had the great pleasure, and completely unplanned, unexpected surprise, of witnessing a sheep herding. The real deal. We were driving through the mountains of northwestern Ireland, what's known as Glengesh Pass, coming down the pass, when we noticed a bunch of sheep starting to run. En masse.

We pulled over to watch. Two shepherds, two sheep dogs, and hundreds of sheep, scattered all over the mountainside. The two shepherds and the two sheep dogs meticulously gathered the sheep together, the sheep responding both to the familiar voice of the shepherds and movement of the dogs. Eventually making their way to one corner of the vast property. Presumably, as far as we knew, to be sure they were all accounted for.

It was beautiful – and again, as I noted last week, another example of beauty finding us.

We also had the great pleasure of taking a boat tour off the Atlantic coast of Northwestern Ireland, near Donegal, to see the tallest sea cliffs in Ireland. Earlier that same day in fact.

Turns out our boat captain was a sheep farmer by day, or maybe by night, I don't know. At least third generation. His family's land sat above the cliffs. You would often see sheep, off on their own on what appeared from our vantage point to be some precarious position on the cliff's edge. And I mean to tell you, there was plenty of grass to be had far, far away from the edge.

But as we've noted, sheep are sheep. They, WE, are prone to wandering. Losing our way.

He described one dramatic rescue at the cliff's edge, when his father had to use his staff to reach down, at great risk to his own safety, and hook a stray sheep, stranded because it couldn't get back up what it had managed to climb down. I can't do the story justice, but it was legitimately touch and go. It was a high-risk, low-reward operation. His father almost slid down the cliff himself, but he didn't. And the sheep was pulled safely back into the fold.

“If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?”

Beautiful.

We are sheep, whether we like it or not. The metaphor works. And as sheep of the Good Shepherd, all of us, it is the voice of love, of COMPASSION, we hear and recognize as the one that will bring us back again. Home again. It is the movement of love, sometimes the rescue of love, that pulls us back, again and again, to the safety and security of the flock.

But, friends, we are not only sheep. Within an interdependent flock, fold, we are both sheep and shepherds. Grounded in the abiding, unconditional love of the Good Shepherd, we need each other. We are called to care for each other as God cares for us.

The image of sheep-shepherd is used repeatedly in scripture to describe our responsibility for each other. And in the midst of this fraught and altogether ugly, divisive, uninspiring, yet nonetheless consequential, election season, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann lifts up the prophet Ezekiel, and specifically Ezekiel, chapter 34, as “perhaps the most important biblical text concerning governing responsibility.”

Ezekiel begins with condemnation of the shepherd-kings who have neglected their duty with what Brueggemann summarizes as “self-serving indulgence”:

“Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: To the shepherds—thus says the HOLY ONE: Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.”

Sound familiar? Beware the wolves in sheep's clothing. Beware even more the wolves who make no such attempt to disguise their self-serving intentions and indulgences. The politicians and pundits and their monied supporters, the corporate greed-mongers, would-be shepherds, who have only been and are only interested in feeding themselves and those like them, ruling with force and harshness. With fear and violence. With racism and xenophobia and Christian nationalism. On and on.

Wolves in wolves' clothing, make no mistake. They reap what they sow. We reap what we sow.

We hear more of the same prophetic outrage in our reading from the Jeremiah: "Woe, WOE, to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the HOLY ONE. Therefore thus says the HOLY ONE, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the HOLY ONE. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the HOLY ONE."

There is indeed another voice. There is another way.

And God, who we know as the Good Shepherd, is raising up good shepherds and other voices. And as much as our political, electoral process wants us to look for them there (God help us!), the truth is that we are the good shepherds we've been waiting for. We are the good shepherds the world needs, marked above all else by relentless care and compassion.

By love. The love that originates with none other than the Good Shepherd, the God of Love itself. And the love that is embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, the One who was and is a good shepherd himself. The One who looked on those unexpected and altogether unwanted crowds on the shore that day, not with contempt but with compassion. Because he knew that they were like sheep without a shepherd.

We are, often times, if we're being honest with ourselves, those same sheep. Sometimes, many times, we NEED to follow, to be led. To be gathered back to ourselves and each other.

So may we be sheep, not dumb but fully aware of our dependence, our interdependence, attuned and RESPONSIVE not just to ANY voice but to the voice of the HOLY ONE, the voice of Love itself, calling us back, again and again, from our wandering and waywardness, to love. And in love, to the safety and security of the flock TO which we all belong, and ON which we all depend.

But even as we are sheep, we are called, all of us, to be shepherds to and for and with each other. God is on the lookout for good shepherds. Sometimes we need to lead, to tend, to make OUR voices heard.

And so may we be the good shepherds we've been waiting for, attuned and ATTENTIVE to the needs of those around us, to the world around us. Rooted in love above all else, and so ready to offer care and show compassion to those who are scattered and lost, hungry and afraid, until all are fed – and as Jeremiah says, so that all “shall no longer fear or be dismayed,” ... “nor shall any be missing” from the fold.

Because, as God insists, all belong. ALL belong. All BELONG.

The metaphor works. For us, and for God.

May it be so.