

Good Shepherd Sunday April 21, 2024

St. Luke/San Lucas

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

In preparing for this sermon, I took a look at a number of pictures of the good shepherd. It's a popular theme in religious art. While there were a few, more realistic paintings for a middle eastern man, out in the dessert country, looking for a scraggly sheep, most of the pictures were of a very peaceful looking man, standing there, looking out over a beautiful green pasture at a flock of fluffy white lambs. Very pastoral. Very peaceful. Very kum-by-yah. However, when we look at this passage as a peaceful, pastoral scene, we may be missing some of what I think Jesus was trying to convey when he told this story. And yes, Jesus had a point with this story, because we know that he was not a shepherd. He was a carpenter. So what was he trying to tell his followers, and us? I'd like to start with a story of my own.

A number of years ago, when my daughter Renata was about 3, we were living in New York. One Saturday morning, we went clothes shopping. As I was examining the clothes on the rack, Renata was beside me, playing with their plastic dinosaur—and then they weren't. I looked. I called. I tried not to panic—but I'm not sure how well I did with that part.

It seemed like my brain was split into two parts: one telling me to stay calm, start a grid search, mobilize assistance; the other shouting Danger, Danger, Danger. Then, in a moment of relative silence, I heard Renata's voice, singing the dinosaur song. I still couldn't see them, but I could hear them. It turned out that the racks of clothes had a space in the middle, surrounded by fabric, just big enough for a toddler and toy dinosaur. The perfect dinosaur cave.

It was just a few moments, and Renata wasn't actually in any danger, but it's an experience that every adult who loves a child has experienced at one time or another—that heart-stopping moment when a child is lost, and a parent, a caring adult, will do anything, literally anything, to find them. Climb a mountain. Cross a river. Search and search and search.

And when they find their child, when they are able once again, to hold them close, that feeling of true and complete love is overwhelming.

This story of the Good Shepherd is about that type of love, that type of relationship. Even though we speak of God as a parent, as Our Father, all too often we perceive God as a distant being, someone out there, sitting on a throne, judging.

But with this story, Jesus is reminding his disciples, and us, that God loves us like a parent. While there are times when we, like the prodigal son, walk away from our inheritance, from our loving family, most of the time we're more like clueless toddlers, or sheep. Focused on our own lives. Finding the next clump of green grass. Looking for a dinosaur cave. Not intentionally causing harm, but also not overly aware of our connectedness with others, with the impact our lives may have on others.

And, like a parent, God experiences that sense of deep pain when one of us is lost. And has gone to great lengths to make sure that we all, everyone one of us, has a path to safety, to wholeness, to communion. God came down to earth, walked in our shoes, and gave up his earthly life for our salvation. This is the type of love God has for us.

So, what does this mean for us today, as we live our lives in a modern, industrial world where most of us only encounter sheep at the petting zoo? First, I'd like to encourage all of us to be a bit less toddler-like, a bit less sheep-like. To be a bit less focused on ourselves, and be more aware of the world around us. How we interact with others. Are we showing love? Are we giving thanks for the care God has for us? Are we following God's guidance? Or

are we going our own way, clueless to the concern God has for us? And that leads me to a second item.

I'd like to encourage us all to think about the impact our actions have on God. Most of the time, we think about the relationship going the other way—the impact that God can have on us. We ask for God's assistance through prayer; we study and learn from God's teachings as a way to live a just and holy life.

Rarely, if ever, do we think about the impact our actions have on God. Yet if, as Jesus told us, God loves us as a parent, as a shepherd, then our actions will also have an impact on God. We know that God is love. That God feels sorrow, mourns for us when we go astray. So how are our actions today affecting God? What have we done today that is pleasing to God?

And remember, even when we lose our way, God is out there searching for us, loving us, and always ready to pick us up and carry us home.

Amen.