

My experience with sheep, or most livestock really, is that I attended a high school with an Ag building where classmates in FFA or 4H would prepare for fairs.

I couldn't tell you what each animal needed or if they were to teach with metaphor about tending to their particular breed of animal I would likely miss it.

So had Jesus been speaking to me for the first time about the Good Shepherd it would have likely been lost on me; yet being a shepherd was a familiar career to practically all in Jesus' lifetime.

It was also an image connected to the description of God, as well as how God was the Good Shepherd and others were bad shepherds was known throughout Hebrew scriptures.

An imagery that was intimate to the audience in our text today, even if they weren't a shepherd themselves. So while many, if not most, of us are less familiar with the relationship between a shepherd and its sheep it made sense to those listening to Jesus.

Disciples, Pharisees, and bystanders would have known that shepherds were with their flocks 24/7, they drank their milk, made sure they were safe and healthy, and in some cases would use them for their meat later on.

If they were a shepherd whose flock was going to the temple for sacrifice they would go through the sheep gate and that meant the shepherd went through the gate with their flock, never leaving them until the handoff to the temple leaders took place.

There is a common misconception, one I held until I did some reading about sheep this week, that's that sheep are unintelligent animals. When in fact sheep can recall up to 50 faces or other animals for up to two years.

Recent studies show they can feel emotions, too. They are communal animals and in some cases they have best sheep pals that they stick closely to.

They can be considered unintelligent because they follow each other, if one sheep moves its easier to get the whole flock to move.

Their eyesight is almost 360 degrees peripherally, which helps them spot predators, but they don't have much depth perception so a deep puddle of water can be dangerous to them; thus shepherds need to help them avoid what might be considered basic aspects of nature.

Sheep do not do well with startling noises or yelling, they do not adapt quickly to new routes or objects. If a shepherd is moving them they do so from the front of the flock, leading or calling, rather than from the back of the herd driving them like one does with cattle.

To protect, guide, and nurture sheep well the shepherd must know its flock intimately. And in this close connection the sheep are able to learn their shepherd's voice or regular call, learning to trust to follow the call and respond.

To learn the voice of the one who will guide you to experience life abundantly is something we humans can relate to and know it's not so easy. Sheep come to trust their shepherds & follow their voices.

Sheep have come to trust their shepherd because they risk their safety to find the sheep who have wandered off, learning how to best guide the flock, and keep them safe along the way.

Shepherds can be alone in this work but often journey with other shepherds or are accompanied by hired hands, those who assist the flock but don't do much beyond that.

Hired hands are the ones who can risk the well being of the flock to get it where it needs to be quickly, rarely learning the nature of the flock the way a shepherd does.

In my studies this week I realized that sheep might be stubborn but they don't need the shepherd because they are unintelligent but rather they are incredibly vulnerable to harm on their own and the shepherd provides a safer life for them.

So often I hear this story as one focusing on Jesus being the Good Shepherd because of the crucifixion but there are so many dynamic ways Jesus was the Good Shepherd before the crucifixion and after the resurrection that often aren't noted.

Jesus knows all he met by name, learned how to teach his disciples so they can hear what he was saying, risked what was deemed correct for the wellbeing of who was in front of him.

All of those experiences of Jesus is what caused this monologue from Jesus that our text is drawn from for today.

Here's what was taking place, Jesus was outside the gate on the Sabbath and he and the disciples came up on a man who was blind, so the disciples ask if it was the sin of this man or the sin of his parents that caused him to be blind from birth. Jesus ignores the premise of their question and says it is so God's works might be revealed.

Jesus didn't just speak of this man to the disciples but bent down, spat on the ground and made a mud mask, coating the man's eyes before telling him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man returns and has sight for the first time in his life.

Those who have only known this man as a blind beggar question how it could be and some go to question the Pharisees to ask how it could be.

In typical Pharisee-Jesus doctrine examinations the Pharisees ask those present how this man received his sight.

As they hear what took place they find themselves divided because some believe this type of healing can only be that of God, while others question how someone who was in relationship with God could do something like this on the Sabbath.

In their questioning of the man with sight they get frustrated or annoyed with how this man continues to challenge their beliefs by merely stating what took place and finally they say, “you were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us?”

Then the Pharisees drove the man with sight out. Jesus hears this and goes to find him, and upon finding him he asks if he believes in the Son of Man and he says “Lord, I believe.”

Then Jesus says he came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.

Pharisees nearby heard this and ask, “surely we are not blind, are we?” And right before our text begins Jesus says to the Pharisees “if you were blind, you would not have sin. But, now that you say, “we see,” your sin remains.”

Then without any interruptions or pause Jesus begins discussing the Good Shepherd and the hired hands. He is likely making reference to the Pharisees being like the hired hands, since they are ones to care for the people but not risk for their beliefs or practices for their health and wellbeing.

The blindness Jesus is discussing here is that the Pharisees are so certain in their doctrine that they are adamant that they know how the law must be observed, so much absolutism that it has made them blind to the point that when seeing salvation, injustice, and grace when it is right in front of them and instead choose their doctrine.

Where in this story we have the man with sight is not sure how Jesus can be who he is based on Jewish doctrine but believes because Jesus not only restored his sight but gave him a path to live life abundantly, no longer on the outside of the temple begging for scraps but free to move among society openly for the first time.

Jesus saw the man in need, dismissed that sin caused his blindness, ignores Sabbath law to heal him, and reveals to the man who has felt unseen as much as he was unable to see that Jesus saw him and knows him.

And in doing so reveals that he has been and will forever be the Good Shepherd. This discourse with the Pharisees takes place shortly before preparations for Jesus' death and foretelling of the resurrection take place.

Here we are with this reading during Eastertide and know the stories following Jesus' resurrection and how he was equipping the disciples to carry on.

An exchange that passes on the shepherding to the disciples happens after the resurrection. It is when Jesus and Peter go back and forth three times with Jesus asking Peter if he loves him, Peter saying Yes, Lord; you know I love you, then Jesus telling Peter to feed Jesus' sheep.

With us following The Good Shepherd and carrying on the charge to feed Jesus' sheep we too become shepherds, just as much as we are called to be God's sheep.

Knowing that we are not the Good Shepherd but called to care for God's flock we are in the beautiful both/and of discipleship.

We are continually learning from Jesus' life and teachings and those who have led us well in this life, while we also seek to be leading and caring for each other as Christ has loved us.

At times it can feel as though we are either the sheep or the shepherd but truly we are both the sheep and shepherds throughout life.

We are able to be shepherds because we have been loved so fully and known completely by God that we can share that Light and wisdom with all we meet.

This means we make the effort to get to know each other authentically, knowing how to care for each other well and in ways that allow those in our lives to know we have seen and heard them.

This does not come easily to us because we often care for others as we need to be cared for more so than taking the time to learn how others want to be cared for.

And there's the distrust that if we were to be asked how we need to be cared for that people would remember or respect it or keep it confidential.

This can make us susceptible to believing others want the same thing we do and so we generalize that others feel like we do, even though we have not asked the vulnerable questions needed to know that.

Many of you can relate to experiencing these responses from others, key folks who have experienced this are parents and teachers.

Both know that how you care for one child will not work the same with another child or that when a child/student doesn't feel seen or heard they turn to generalizations saying things like "this is what the class feels or needs" so they don't have to make it personal and by extension more vulnerable.

All of which is easier than having to say "I feel this way", thus they protect themselves – consciously or not – in general terms.

So as shepherds we are called to be in meaningful relationships learning what the fold of God needs and sharing who we are so we can be known as well.

As shepherds of God's flock of sheep we are called to welcome all, no matter how comfortable or difficult it can be. Being a congregation of radical welcome means we know we will get it wrong at times.

And that when we do not welcome well, we name it and grow from it so not to be unwelcoming the next time.

It means the process of living in the tensions that come with welcoming all of God's Beloveds. Tension because the process is slow to welcome another person fully, yet we want to find the quick response or solution because we are taught in our society that tension is negative.

Yet if we look to Jesus, most of his ministry was filled with tensions and slow understandings.

There was tension when one disciple would understand Jesus before the others and struggled to be patient with their peers to come to their own understanding.

Tension in Jesus reminding the disciples and Pharisees that all are welcome to eat at his table, wash his feet, or share life abundantly with him.

There should always be tension in radical welcome because we are continuing to learn how to welcome all and explore why it's hard for us to welcome some people and easy to welcome others.

This radical welcome is one that God orchestrates, as Psalm 23 says - 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..

Radical welcome is one where we can be in the presence of our enemies and be safe for God is the one to bring us into that space. It is a welcome that creates in us newness of love and grace. Welcome should always challenge us because it should always cause us to grow.

We live in tension when we welcome and do not expect people to assimilate to how we believe or worship or serve and that can be difficult in practice because it means we put the collective before our personal preferences.

We can live these tensions because Jesus has already journeyed through those tensions and as our Good Shepherd continues to journey with us still.

As we live into the radical welcome of the Gospel let us remember that there are others who hear God's voice and are not part of the flock as we know it to be, yet are in the fold of God.

This means we don't have to concern ourselves with who is in the flock and who is not; our focus is inviting people to experience God's radical welcome and then actively open ourselves to welcome them into this particular expression of God's flock that we call Calvary.

Calvary, you are a very welcoming congregation. It's something we hear back from guests and new attenders on a regular basis.

So continue to be a welcoming community; always assessing how we can be more welcoming as we grow in community.

This is also an individual journey of awareness and here's how we can begin to explore that within our personal discipleship.

If you aren't sure how to open yourself to more of God's radical welcome think of someone in your life who does it continually and ask to meet with them and hear more about how they open their lives to welcome.

If you are someone who welcomes but notices that you then want people to believe as you do, worship how you like to worship, or participate the way you think they should I'd invite you to explore the awareness of implicate bias and learn where those biases are based in. Not working to adjust those biases at first, just to open the mind to their awareness.

If you are someone who welcomes openly and freely continue that work and ask yourself if you let others welcome you, know you well, or if the care is one directional; if it's one directional explore why you feel uneasy about allowing others to know you and care of you.

We are all invited to be God's sheep and God's shepherds as we continue to grow in Jesus' wisdom as the Good Shepherd. We never arrive or achieve this journey for when we believe we have we become spiritually blind.

When we learn we can never know all of God and can live in the mystery of God we allow ourselves to freely see faith. May we be guided by the Good Shepherd, be trusting sheep in God's flock, and be dedicated shepherds to those in our lives and those who come into it.

Being a shepherd is hard work, but it's work that we are called to do. So who are the shepherds among us? Every single one of us if we respond to God's invitation.