

Called to be a Shepherd?

The setting for today's gospel reading (John 10:22-30) is a winter's day in Jerusalem. The temple authorities continue to ask Jesus whether he is the messiah. And, Jesus continues to answer them using metaphor. In a passage that preceded this reading, Jesus declared that he is the good shepherd and he explains what being a good shepherd means. It means to stand up to danger, to protect the flock, and to not run away.

In last week's Gospel, we heard Jesus use similar imagery when he told Peter to "feed my sheep." "Tend my sheep."

Here, Jesus shifts perspectives and talks about what it means to be part of the flock: to be protected forever, to hear the voice of Jesus, to be known by Jesus and to follow him.

Like so much of scripture, these passages describe a time and place far away from the streets of California, back to a place where wild animals, foul weather and harsh conditions made ordinary farm work a dangerous occupation. To do his job, the shepherd may have to fight the very human instinct to flee from danger and to face a pack of hungry wolves.

For me, and perhaps for many of us in 21st century, tech-savvy California, the shepherd metaphor breaks down when we try to put ourselves in the place of the flock. We don't think of ourselves as fluffy but dumb animals that have to be told what to do. And we certainly don't like yappy little herding dogs, snapping at our heels. After all, we have free will, the ability to think and act independently. And we have opposable thumbs. We can open gates all by ourselves.

Instead of a flock of sheep, I prefer to use another term: the human family of God.

Feed my people. Serve my people.

Today's readings show us the comfort and reassurance that is available to us as the human family of God. The 23d Psalm is one of the most recognizable pieces of divine poetry, one that we may hear at a funeral, a time that we particularly need comfort. There we see the promise of safety amid our enemies, shelter from storms, goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.

The charitable work of a good person was recognized and rewarded in the passage from Acts (Acts 9:36-43). The story of Tabitha appears in scripture just this once but what a story it is. Following Jesus' teachings, she served the poor and the lonely, widows who were particularly vulnerable in an agricultural economy that required physical strength. But this good and holy woman became sick and died and the people she served wept. Peter, who was summoned by her people, raised her from the dead and presented her to the people.

Even the passage from Revelations (Rev 7:9-17), a book with which some Episcopalians have issues, is reassuring. Those who have come out of a great ordeal will not hunger or thirst again and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

The source of this comfort is, of course, the Lord, our Good Shepherd.

What is the core message for us today? God is with us. No matter the challenge we face, God is with us.

An Irish mystic once said that "life's a gift. But it is a gift that is wrapped in pain." There is pain that comes to us privately, such as when we grieve the loss of a loved one or face a serious illness of our own or of someone close to us. And we are comforted by God's presence. We are nourished and cared for.

There is also a more public pain that we see in the world around us, in the faces of the hungry or the un-housed or those who cannot speak up for themselves. We hear that pain in the voices of the desperate, of those on the margins, of those who live in fear. We grieve the injury to our community, to our brothers and sisters because we know that when one of us is diminished, all of us are.

On those occasions, we are called to be a shepherd, to stand up to danger and to not run away, to provide comfort and support.

There are times that the pain takes the form of fear, xenophobia and racism. One such time was 74 years ago when fear of the other led to a particularly dark chapter in American history. After the attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor, fear and hatred of Americans of Japanese ancestry flourished on the West Coast of the United States. Over a three month period starting in March of 1942 with a military proclamation that announced the exclusion of anyone with an "enemy ancestry," the US government froze the assets of Japanese

Americans, imposed curfews, restricted travel and ultimately removed 120,000 people, a majority of whom were born in the United States, from their homes in Oregon, Washington and California to “relocation centers” in remote and isolated places around the country.

Americans of German or Italian ancestries were not included in the exclusion.

The effect of the internment was immediate and profound. Japanese Americans lost homes, farms, and businesses because they could only take what they could carry to the “relocation centers.” They had to dispose of their assets, often at rock bottom prices, before they were interned. In fact, among the supporters of the exclusion were white farmers who resented the presence of Japanese farmers and who wanted their land.

The humiliation experienced by the internees might have been even worse than the financial losses. Families were herded into the stables at local racetracks, which were the temporary internment camps. The message was clear: not only are you untrustworthy, disloyal and dangerous because of your ancestry, you’re not truly human.

To be certain, there were some good shepherds among white Americans, people who did what they could to support their friends and neighbors. Some white farmers tended the land of their neighbors, not as a land grab but as a service to their friends. Other people made certain that the family home was rented out and the mortgage paid, thus ensuring that the internees had a home to come back to at war’s end. But those occurrences were the exception, not the rule.

So, why is this bit of history important? Even though it took place before most of us were born, fear and hatred of the other did not end when World War II ended. Even today, we hear politicians and opinion makers blaming the other for various problems of society, for the challenges of living together. Build a fence. Send them back to where they came from. Keep them out.

My training in the law makes me recognize that people have a First Amendment right to express their opinions, no matter how outrageous I may think those opinions are. But the deacon in me knows that when hateful speech moves toward action, I as a follower of Jesus must stand up to danger, and not run away, and to protect the flock, all the members of the human family of God.

Our family needs us. When we are called to go into those dark places, to light a light in the places ruled by fear and want, to reach out in friendship and love to the outcasts, we do God's work. We act as shepherds.

Feed my people. Serve my people.

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