

August 19, 2018

Animals of the Bible: Sheep

First Reading ~ *Genesis 29:1-9*

Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern tribes. He arrived at a well in a field that had three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for the well provided water to the sheep. A huge stone covered the mouth of the well. When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone off the mouth of the well to water the flocks, and then they would replace the stone over the mouth of the well. Jacob asked the shepherds, "Friends, where are you from?" "We're from Harran," they replied. He said to them, "Do you know Laban, Nahor's grandson?" "Yes, we know him," they answered. Then Jacob asked them, "Is he well?" "Yes, he is," they said, "and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep." "Look," he said, "the sun is still high; it is not time for the flocks to be gathered. Water the sheep and take them back to pasture." "We can't," they replied, "until all the flocks are gathered and the stone has been rolled away from the mouth of the well. Then we will water the sheep." While he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherd.

Second Reading ~ *adapted from Barbara Brown in An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*

Moses's life changed one day while he was tending his father-in-law's sheep. According to the storyteller, he had led the flock beyond the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God, when an angel of God appeared to him in a burning bush. The bush was not right in front of Moses, however. It must have been over to the side somewhere, because when Moses saw it, he said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 The bush required Moses to take a time-out, at least if he wanted to do more than glance at it. He could have done that. He could have seen the flash of red out of the corner of his eye, said, "Oh, how pretty," and kept right on driving the sheep. He did not know that it was an angel in the bush, after all. Only the storyteller knew that. Moses could have decided that he would come back tomorrow to see if the bush was still burning, when he had a little more time, only then he would not have been Moses. He would just have been a guy who got away with murder, without ever discovering what else his life might have been about. What made him Moses was his willingness to turn aside. Wherever else he was supposed to be going and whatever else he was supposed to be doing, he decided it could wait a minute. He parked the sheep and left the narrow path in order to take a closer look at a marvelous sight.

Third Reading ~ *adapted from Father Richard Rohr*

Metaphor is the only possible language available to religion because it alone is honest about Mystery. The underlying messages that different religions and denominations use are often in strong agreement, but they use different images to communicate their own experience of union with God. That should not shock or disappoint anyone, unless they are still kids shouting, "This is my toy, and the rest of you can't touch it! It's mine! I am going to take it and leave." Jesus who is always using metaphors, says, for example, "There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too listen to my voice" (John 10:16a). He is quite obviously talking metaphorically by calling people sheep. He is also saying that sometimes the outsider to the "flock" hears as well as the insider. Furthermore, he says that he cares about and he respects the "other sheep," which means that we should too. These are crucial points, and those who refuse to mine the metaphor will miss them.