

The readings for Sunday, April 22, 2018:

First Reading: Acts 4:5-12

Psalm: Psalm 23

Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24

Gospel: John 10:11-18

In this week's Gospel, we see one of the most persistent metaphors for Jesus: Jesus as shepherd. Even in these non-agricultural days, we understand this image, probably because it has been so widely used during 2000 years of Christianity.

It's interesting to think about the other side of this metaphor. If Jesus is the shepherd, who are the sheep? We are, of course. Those of us who haven't grown up around sheep probably think of them as delightful, fuzzy creatures. But they're not. They're big and smelly and not especially bright--that's why they need a shepherd. On my bleak days, calling humans sheep seems like an apt metaphor. We tend not to act in our self-interest. We tend to stand in place with a blank look on our faces. If no one comes along to guide us, we'll just stand there, blinking. If we get knocked over, we need someone to pick us up. I could go on and on like this, but I'll let you Google the word sheep and consider all the poetic possibilities.

What I found most interesting about this passage which is so familiar is verse 16: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd."

I'm of two minds about this passage. I read it with the knowledge of all that has happened in the last two thousand years, and all the ways that this kind of Biblical language has been used coercively and hurtfully to imply that only Christians are the ones with the Truth. I'm aware of the disastrous actions that can follow that kind of belief.

But this larger vision of Jesus does interest me. It interests me because it's in the Gospel of John, which was the last Gospel written. Earlier Gospels don't have this same kind of expansive vision, this vision of Jesus as the shepherd of all people. Is it there because of the spread of Christianity that the writer who composed the Gospel of John had seen? I'm fascinated by the differences in the Gospels.

As a poet, I'm also interested in the power of this metaphor. Here we are in a world where few of us have seen a sheep, and yet, this metaphor still speaks to us. Most of us are likely moved by the idea of a shepherd who would sacrifice all to save one sheep. You find a similar narrative in many romantic love stories--how desperately we want to believe that someone can love us that completely.

That's the Good News of the Gospels: we are loved that completely. Someone believes that we're worthy of that effort. We will not be sacrificed for the good of the flock. The Good Shepherd will sacrifice all for the individual sheep. We can rest secure in that knowledge.