

Sermon on John 10:11-18, Psalm 23, and 1 John 3:16-24
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So just what does it mean to be a sheep anyway? Well, I've been told and read in numerous places that sheep are just dumb. They will follow each other anywhere. If your friend jumped off a cliff, would you do it too? Apparently, a sheep will. I read a quote this week which says, "Sheep nibble themselves lost" (James Howell, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching). The sheep begins to eat and sees a greener patch over there. So off he goes. Nibble, nibble. Then another. Oh and look over there. And off he goes. If he remembers to look up, all of a sudden, he is lost.

I also read this week that a sheep rancher says that the myth of the lack of intelligence of sheep is just that—a myth. It was made up by cattle ranchers to show the inferiority of sheep because sheep refuse to be herded. Instead, they want to be led. The shepherd can't stand behind them and push them along as a cowboy would do as he herded cows. If he does that, the sheep will just run around behind him. Instead, he must stand in front and call to them, leading them in the direction the shepherd desires.

So, maybe being called a sheep isn't such an insult. I don't know.

I do know that if you are a sheep, you live in a flock. Single sheep just don't happen. I don't know why. Maybe protection. Maybe they are just sociable animals. Maybe it's just the way it is, but sheep equals flock.

In these passages today, we are told that we are sheep. I don't know if we should be offended to be classed as such a seemingly unintelligent species. But, I've decided to get over it and wonder what it might mean to have Jesus as a shepherd. Not only is Jesus our shepherd. He is our Good Shepherd. It's actually such a lovely image. Jesus stands in front of us with his crooked staff. The wind blows gently on the sun drenched hillside. The grass bursts

from the earth, enticingly green; the bubbling brook bounces over the smooth stones nearby.

And, we graze, fat, happy, safe.

Except that's not how I have experienced it. Too often, I think we try to pretty up Jesus and his love. We try to make it nice and comfortable and warm. And on so many occasions, it's not. Jesus' love is actually an unsettling, demanding love. 1 John reminds us that it's not just a love that holds us close. It is a love that demands devotion. It demands action and truth. It is not easy. It is not safe. At least, not in the ways we would define it ease and safety.

When we truly hear our Shepherd's voice and really heed it, we may be led into some very scary places where our comfort levels are trampled on. We may be led to really question our affluence in the light of another's abject poverty. We may be led to wonder if what we are doing with our lives is really what we should be doing. We may be led to the bed of someone who is dying, only to hold her hand. We may be led to confront someone who is acting in a way not appropriate for the flock. We may be asked to give away more than we ever thought we had. We may be led to sit and be quiet and just be.

Wherever we are led, for sure, the passage in John says, we will be led to the flocks of the "other sheep". Jesus isn't about just hanging out with us. Jesus will lead us to encounters with the other. These days, the other could mean for us...the poor, the homosexual, the Jew, the oppressed, the AIDS victim, the Buddhist, the Muslim...any that we define as other than us. And, for us, this won't be easy, for most of the time, we are afraid of the other. Afraid we might have to change ourselves and our certainties because of our encounters with the other. Even as we shake in our sheepish shoes, we will come together as we follow this Shepherd, drawn together in the love of the Shepherd which unifies us always.

If all this isn't enough to make us wonder about following this shepherd, he laid down his life for his sheep. He died so that we may finally get what it means to live in true love, to live in service to God and therefore to one another.

Following this Shepherd seems really outrageous to me. It sounds scary to me. It sounds like hard work. It sounds like I might have to give up myself and who I think I am and allow myself to be transformed.

I suppose I could continue to nibble myself lost. But, given the promises, given the experiences of freedom and real life that I've had when I am able to truly follow this Shepherd, I'm willing to go for it. For, we are promised, that with this Shepherd, we shall not want. We shall be led by still waters. We shall be restored. Goodness and mercy will follow us, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. We will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.
Amen.