

Of Sheep and the Shepherd
4th Sunday of Easter - May 7, 2006
Ezekiel 34; John 10:11-18

We didn't actually plan it this way, but once again, I'm preaching on the Good Shepherd text. Talk about typecasting. You all know that herding with Kiri, Cordell and Lyta is my biggest hobby. Hearing Jesus' words rings especially true for me: *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I lay down my life for the sheep... they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

I've learned a lot, shepherding with my dogs. First, sheep aren't as dumb as you might think. They size up a dog and handler's skill within seconds. At a recent trial, Lyta and I were trying for an advanced title. At one point, Lyta had to move the sheep away from me and drive them through a panel about 50 yards away. Three youngsters decided to high-tail it for the far end of the field. The older fellow decided to stop dead in his tracks and start grazing. I thought about sending Lyta to fetch the youngsters back to the old guy, but Lyta decided to rouse *him* and send him packing to the lambs - who were now about 150 yards up the field. She got them all together, marched them back to me, and continued the course without mishap, giving her the title. Deciding to force the older sheep to move, and bringing him to the babies, was the better choice. Old Guy respected Lyta's authority, the youngsters were

comforted by his presence, and everybody stuck together. Lyta's a true shepherd's dog. She understood Jesus' words, "I know my own and my own know me" better than I did!

Second, sheep really do listen to the shepherd's voice. Sheep that are raised mostly for wool and milk can live for a dozen years. A relationship develops between flock and shepherd. In ancient Palestine, several flocks grazed together during the day, but in the evening, each shepherd called his own sheep by name, and led them into their own sheepfold for the night. Even now, that dynamic is at work. I recognize Malcolm, who's taught dozens of dogs the herding ropes. Malcolm, in turn, assesses each shepherding student and their dog, and by his action, clues the lambs about the best way to respond to dog and human. Sometimes, of course, he also teaches them how to yank our chains!

Third, even though I'm just a "hobby herder," I know a bit about a shepherd's responsibilities. Lambs need protection from the elements. Flocks must be moved to good grazing and to water, or else both must be brought to them. An infected foot or difficult delivery can strand or even cause death. Coyotes, rogue dogs, careless or malicious human intruders, and a host of other ills threaten the flock. In turn, a shepherd's livelihood depends on the sheep's health and safety. The shepherd helps with lambing, inoculates against disease, inspects for injury, patrols fence lines, trains flock guardian as well as herding dogs,

searches for strays, faces down predators, shears, tags, and transports the sheep, and in general puts limb if not life on the line for the sake of the sheep. A shepherd's life is not an easy one.

Jesus used an image that even today rings true. His relationship to his "flock," his people, bespeaks knowledge, intimacy, responsibility, and constant care. He knows the dangers that threaten us: the things Martin Luther summarized as "the world, the devil, and our sinful selves." The Good Shepherd's knowledge of our innermost essence - sins, foibles and all - is deep, thorough, and compassionate. He knows that, just as one sheep in isolation is in grave danger of injury or predation, so an isolated person is in grave danger of falling into sin or being preyed upon by the sinfulness of others. His constant mission is to gather all his people into a secure and loving whole. He desires an abiding, intimate relationship with each and with all of his people, based on trust and mutual knowledge. In fact, that knowledge is not to be that of mere sheep and shepherd, but on a par with the mutual knowing of Jesus and his heavenly Father. He will lay his own life on the line in order to accomplish all of that.

That's all remarkable enough. Now add to that the fact that, for the Jews, "shepherd" was a metaphor for "king." Since King David started out as "little David, the shepherd boy," this is understandable. Throughout the Old Testament, the king-as-shepherd image is used

frequently, though not often in a way that complimented the office holders! In Ezekiel's biting words: *Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.*

But Ezekiel went further. Since God's people were so poorly served by kings, God would intervene: *As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered. I will feed them with good pasture. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed; I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.*

Now Jesus comes along and declares, *I am the Good Shepherd.* All the kingly responsibilities and divine promises coalesce in Jesus Christ, Son of David and Son of God. He adds: *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.* He is King, Shepherd, and God of Israel, and all people whom he calls by name. He is King, Shepherd and God for us.

But remember: *rogue* sheep go to market! My instructor sells off sheep that are aggressive or run themselves into a frenzy (or a fence) for no good reason. Similarly, Jesus has the right to judge his sheep: *As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them and be their shepherd.*

There's challenge as well as comfort in Jesus' claim to be our Good Shepherd. He will "feed *with justice.*" His shepherding is meant to "rub off" on his flock, so that we hear his voice and follow him into green pastures of piety and paths of righteousness. Jesus willingly gives his life for even the most foolish and wayward of us. But he bestows the Holy Spirit so that we turn from being wayward, foolish, selfish, thoughtless and faithless. He breathes that same Spirit upon his Church so that we share his clear water and good pasture, his forgiveness and salvation, with the lean, weak sheep who have not heard or

heeded the Shepherd's voice but whom he longs to gather, shelter, save and love along with us who feed so richly on his grace.

Jesus intends for each of us to grow in him, through the power of the Spirit, into deep, lasting fellowship with his Father. He won't quit until he is King, Shepherd and God over our lives, over all people, and over all creation. He won't quit until the "wolves" of sin, evil and death have been sent packing. He won't quit until we truly are one flock, with one Good Shepherd.

We had two funerals this week. Near the end of the service comes this blessing: *Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Acknowledge, we beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming....* And then at the graveside, the mourners are similarly sent with a word of blessing: *The God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will....*

In this life, a shepherd's work is never done; I know that from training my dogs. But a day will come when our Good Shepherd's work *is* done; and then he will invite us to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Until that day, may we hear his voice gladly, follow him trustfully, do his will eagerly, and never be sheepish about being part of his flock.