

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Why the Lamb?"
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Fourth Sunday of Easter

The Bible has many parables, metaphors and illustrations which are quite foreign to us, not always because of how ancient they are, but often because the things most people knew in the agrarian society of old, we mostly do not know today. For instance, I asked a couple of years ago, how many people have ever had experience raising sheep or been around sheep on a farm through the different seasons? How many, by a show of hands?

Shepherding and sheep have been around probably longer than what we call human civilization, empires and the like. The Bible traces back shepherding to Abel in Genesis 4, who was also the first murder victim in the Bible. The reason for shepherding was quite practical. Like all animal husbandry, you kept the animal for food and clothing, the most basic of human needs. As such, one's survival depended upon one's farming and the raising of animals, what is called mixed farming today.

Most farmers developed some relationship to their flocks and crops. They weren't pets, but they were the means of living, and so it is to this day. Without the farmers, we could not live, eat or be clothed.

Throughout ancient civilizations, the raising of sheep and other animals brought with it some spirituality and religious rituals. The taking of life was not to be done lightly. In the Jewish tradition, the slaughtering of an animal was a time to give thanks to God and to consider anew one's relationship to God. Unlike today's slaughter houses, which move quickly and meaninglessly, almost as if the animals were industrial products, the ancient Israelites were encouraged to bring animals to the Tabernacle and then to the Temple, where they would give thanks to God. This would regularly occur by bringing the first produce from the gardens and the first animals born in the Spring and by bringing other animals from their flocks and herds as an offering and thanksgiving for the gift of life that God has given us.

By this the religious leaders could also live because the people would bring their offerings, and that way the priests and religious leaders could eat the parts of the animals not required by the Lord for sacrifice. This is still what we practice today when you bring your offerings to church, we can keep up

the building, and we can pay an administrator and a musician and a pastor, because you offer a part of what you are given by God to prosper God's work. And that is how I and my family have lived for many years.

So the keeping of sheep, for example, quickly took on a spiritual significance, because you would bring a lamb without spot or blemish (that is, not one of your sick or defective animals) to the Lord in the Spring. You would also bring other animals. One kind of sacrifice had you, the owner or steward of the animal, place your hands on the head of the animal while the priest slit the throat of the animal. Your sins, that is your rebellious acts and unhealthy ways, your criminal tendencies would be transferred to the animal and the animal would pay the price for your offences. This was and is a way God helps us to see the gravity and weight of our sins, and explains why the Bible says that there can be no forgiveness of sins without blood. The death penalty is upon us all, but to teach us respect for the life of the animal, and more so for respect in regard to the justice issue of our debts and trespasses against God having grave consequences, the sacrificial system was set up.

All of this culminates in the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As we trust in this Lamb, we have our hands laid upon his head as he dies on the cross, and he takes the penalty for our sins, as we go free.

Just as the Passover Lamb was the meal of Israel leaving Egypt. And the blood of the Lamb on the doorpost was the sign of forgiveness and grace which told the destroying angel to not harm anyone in the household marked by the blood, so we who trust Jesus also are not destroyed after death and judgment, but continue in a new life.

This Lamb of God is also paradoxically the Good Shepherd. So not only does animal husbandry become the backbone of society, this particular relationship between Shepherd and sheep also becomes a central image in the Scriptures and ancient cultures. It becomes the main metaphor for leader and followers. Even Homer in the *Illiad* uses this metaphor for the relationship between kings or governors and their people. In the Bible, there are good shepherds and bad ones. The 23rd Psalm is an example of a Good one. That shepherd has made sure the sheep are safe from wild animals and bad weather, well fed, well-watered in a desert land which can be unforgiving. The Good Shepherd in John 10 is a picture of a person who makes sure that the flock stays together and that the younger ones do not

stray, for fear of predators of all kinds. The shepherd might use dogs to help keep the flock together. The shepherd was responsible for the sheep and would have to make restitution to the owner if one were lost. The shepherd cared about his sheep, whereas the thief and the uncaring hired person would only care about themselves. The shepherd even called them by name, and they would know him personally.

The shepherd had such a relationship with the flock, that if several flocks were at one watering hole, then his own would hear his voice and follow him. And I've also told you the story of the member of St. Andrew's in Armstrong who had a little flock who chose to name her sheep with operatic names. I was speaking with her about the Scripture that says the Lord calls us by name and we hear his voice. I asked her what her experience was. She said, as we were sitting on her deck overlooking the ten acres of pasture, "Priscilla, is that you Priscilla." And sure enough, "Baa" came the response. I said, "Are you sure that isn't a fluke." "Well, let's see," she said. And as called Priscilla's name again, the ewe answered with a "baa."

Now just like dairy farming, shepherding is mostly a female adventure. You make sure your flock is mostly ewes and the ram has a small but important part in the whole operation. And then the lambs come. And holding a lamb was quite an experience. I was encouraged to pick up the lamb and while picking it up, I'm sorry to say, I was more worried about getting soiled than just enjoying the experience to the full.

So we all have a chance to relate to the Lamb, the Lamb of God. We all have a choice to follow the Good Shepherd. Sheep don't seem to be very smart. And perhaps it is a commentary on our spiritual state, that we do need appropriate leadership in life. We do need a shepherd and often seek one, whether consciously or unconsciously. It's not that we are not smart, don't hear me incorrectly. There are some brilliant people here, some of the top minds in the community. But all of us, me included, need to recognize how much we need spiritual help and guidance to find our way to God, to the truth and to Jesus. It doesn't come automatically. We need each other. Often we don't believe without research and we don't give ourselves to God without thoroughly considering all the options. Yet, as we do, we can know the Good Shepherd. This is particularly when we face death, whether our own or someone else's.

We can also trust the Good Shepherd for our congregation. Congregation is another word for flock, just as Pastor is another word for shepherd. But we do not believe the Minister is the Shepherd, but only an under-shepherd leading us to the Good Shepherd. We believe it is not one man that makes this place happen, but all of us together. In fact, the leadership of this place is shared by all the elders, the ruling elders and the teaching elder or Minister together form the Session which leads us. And we are trying to learn more about how we can be more faithful a flock here together, more faithful in our leadership, stewarding what we have been given, with a history of generations, coming up on 235 years.

That's why four of us are going to Niagara for a few days, to learn more about helping us creatively become excellent in a few areas. We are going to learn how to better manage our money and our resources. We will share with you what we learn and we hope the whole flock will benefit, in fact, flocks across the city will. We are going with four members of our sister congregation St. Andrew's and we hope that we will catch a new vision for this place. There is so much more than what we have experienced in the past that awaits us, certainly more than just survival or getting along, or paying the bills.

We trust you will keep us in prayer as we go, and that you too will be asking the Shepherd of our souls what your part is here. Every one of us makes a difference.

Let us pray.