

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

May 12, 2019
Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

The readings this week:

- Acts 9:36-43 ◦ Psalm 23
- Revelation 7:9-17 ◦ John 10:22-30



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Learning to be Sheep

Sheep again, that well-worn metaphor. The Bible tells of countless flocks and many working shepherds: Abel, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Amos, and the shepherds of Bethlehem. The image of a shepherd tending a flock (the latter a frequent stand-in for the people of Israel) recurs often. In the Old Testament, shepherd imagery may point to God, the promised Messiah, or human leaders appointed by God: prophets, priests, and kings. Some of those human shepherds are said to have scattered their sheep, as in Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Ezekiel 34. In such passages, a worthy shepherd is typically promised to gather from the scattered remnants a new, well cared for flock.

Sheep, as I've noted in previous lectionary reflections, are not intelligent. Left alone, they wander off, get into tight spots, tumble over cliffs, and fall to predators. After centuries of human-directed selection and husbandry, whatever survival skills wild sheep began with have long since been bred out of their descendants. To be called "the sheep of his flock" is no compliment.

Even so, this week's readings might tempt us to smug self-recognition, as if, after a perfunctory admission of past stupidities, we are now undoubtedly the sheep who hear the shepherd's voice and will soon enough stand in the presence of the enthroned Lamb (who is, paradoxically, the eternal shepherd). It's tempting to see those flock-scattering shepherds as someone the other: first century Jewish leaders, members of other churches and denominations, clergy or theologians whose actions or convictions we find appalling. It's tempting to imagine we know who is and who isn't on the right side of salvation history. We may well be among the sheep who listen, and we may fervently hope to one day stand before the Lamb, but the smugness and certainty must go.

Christians remain a visibly scattered flock, broken into dispersed remnants, each remembering something of the shepherd's voice – its cadences, timbre, or modulation – and hoping we've got the important parts right. These woolly bands have, perhaps, stumbled closer together over the last century, but we are not yet one.

Therein lies another temptation: imagining that we, the sheep, can organize or force ourselves back into a single flock, as if we have the intelligence to plan such a thing, the power to make it happen, or the imagination to envision what unity – rather than uniformity – would look like. The sacrificed Lamb may be the eternal shepherd, but we are, and remain for the

foreseeable future, mere sheep.

I have a dear friend who was chrismated as a child in the Orthodox faith, traveled awhile in Evangelical circles through early adulthood, and is once again immersed in the Orthodoxy of his youth, though with a generous ecumenical vision gained through encounters with Christians from various traditions. He and I were engaged in another of our discussions about East-West unity when he prefaced a reply with the phrase, "If unity is what God wills for us..." I was struck by the conditionality in his words, the "if" rather than "because."

"Of course God wills us to be one," I thought. Jesus says as much in John 17:21. But the temptation – for me at least – is to imagine I know my role in that reunification or that I might help restore unity in ways I can understand and direct. I want to be one of those sheep that organizes the others. As if such socially adept sheep existed. As if mere sheep can choose to be shepherd.

I am a sheep. My task is to feed on the lush or barren pastures to which the shepherd chooses to lead me. My task is to listen – first and foremost for the voice of the shepherd, but also for the bleating of my fellow sheep, whether in my own little band, a neighboring one, or a group just over the crest of the hill, whom I'd imagined lost forever. There are other sheep who've forgotten the voice entirely, though the shepherd remembers them. Their bleating is no less coherent than mine. They're not a problem to be solved. They, too, are beloved. My task is to be patient, to wait on the shepherd's voice.

I'm not giving up on working for Christian unity. I may have some small role to play in that mystery, but it will not be of my choosing nor will its result be the fruit of my doing. Whatever unity awaits – on either side of the eschaton – will almost certainly come as a surprise. I'll likely find it disappointing at first, as if God's fullness should conform to my expectations. In the end, those who long for unity may need to acquire a taste for the real thing.

For now, though, I feed on the good Word, on the gift of prayer, and on the many graces I've been granted. I listen for the call of other sheep, even those with whom I sincerely disagree. They may know something of the shepherd's voice I've forgotten or ignored. They can help me to hear that voice rightly, or at least better than I hear it now.

For them, O Lord, teach me to be truly grateful, and let me graze in your green meadows awhile longer. I'm a slow learner. I am a sheep.

~ Brian Volck, [Ekkleisa Project](#)



___ 1st Reading: [Acts 9:36-43](#)

How would you describe a life of impact in today's world? Tabitha had such an impact on those around her that they were not going to let death take her away. What motivated Tabitha to help those around her? Peter traveled 10 miles to get to Tabitha. Why did he raise her from the dead? Was it to do more good works? What are some ways you can have an impact where you work and in your neighborhood? In what ways are serving and sharing the Gospel of Jesus connected? "A good test of Christian character is how people treat those considered unimportant in society, especially when no one is looking." What role does the church have in helping the needy members of society? Inevitably all of us will have a eulogy read for us one day. If you could erase all your regrets what do you want yours to say? [First MB Church](#)

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 23](#)

What are some causes for your soul to become weary and in need of restoration? What are some of the "green pastures" or "quiet waters" that restore your soul? What does it say about our shepherd that he leads us to these restoring places? It has been said that there are "counterfeit paths of soul renewal" tempting us when our souls are weary. What is meant by this? In what ways have you experienced "counterfeit paths"? What do you think it means to experience God's presence in the "death's valley"? What "enemies" surround your table at this time? What provision has God made for you at the table? attitude does David have about life? If we lived with this same attitude, how would it change our daily lives? What is one response that God is calling you to make at this time? [Riverside Church](#)



The Good Shepherd holds his little lambs, his tender little beloved ones in his arms, holds the whole neighborhood: the frightened ones huddling in their houses, the brave ones surrounding the suspect, the crowd down the street clamoring for the capture of the criminal, with plenty of names for him, and reasons for him to suffer. The Good Shepherd holds them all, good and bad, and, holding them, holds them all together, even the frightened one lying in his blood, bewildered by his own cruelty, the evil for which he can never atone, the past and all the futures he's erased, his reasons for others to suffer— with everyone against him now, alone in the world, his brutal solitude, in the desperate boat hiding under the tarp, the Good Shepherd, weeping, holds his little stray lamb, and all of us, because, my friend, all of us are in the same tender arms.

~ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, [Unfolding Light](#)

___ 3rd Reading: [Revelation 7:9-17](#)

How would you reply to someone who said that those who believe what the Bible teaches are prejudiced against people of other races or religions? Why do you think the Bible teaches that salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb? Why do these verses refer to the Person of the Lamb rather than one of His other titles? Why do we need a revelation (or revelations) from God, and not just experience and reason, to know God? In what ways are experience and reason still important for believers to know God? Why could it be dangerous to base all of your knowledge of God only on your spiritual experiences instead of also on the Bible and your use of reason? What do these few verses from Revelation say God has done for us? From these few verses, what does God expect people to do in response? According to these verses, how many people did John see who responded rightly to what God has done? [L.G. Parkhurst, Jr.](#)

___ 4th Reading: [John 10:22-30](#)

What does Jesus teach about the life He gives? What words are used to describe it? Why does Jesus give us this life? What does 'never' mean? Who can snatch us out of the hand of God? What does 'no man' mean? Can we 'jump' out of God's hand? Is it possible for any true believer to be finally lost? What are the grounds for believing that we are safe in God's hands? What scriptures would you use to show your understanding of Christian assurance? How could this doctrine be abused? What are we being kept by God for? What does the doctrine of assurance help us with today? [Time for Truth](#)

Praying Toward Sunday

My dearest Lord.
 Be Thou a bright flame before me.
 Be Thou a guiding star above me.
 Be Thou a smooth path beneath me.
 Be Thou a kindly shepherd behind me.
 Today and evermore.

~ excerpted from a longer prayer by St. Columba.