E4B 2021 John 10:11-18 & Psalm 23

When I was in seminary one of our professors started class one day with a slideshow of Jesus portrayed in various works of art. She asked us which images resonated with us and which didn't and what we thought the different artists were trying to convey about the characteristics of Jesus. Would you be surprised if I told you that the picture she showed of Jesus the Good Shepherd was *not* well-received by the class? Part of the problem may have been that the artist depicted a clearly Scandinavian-looking Jesus with shampoo-commercial hair cradling a very clean, very docile lamb. Of course, none of that would have been realistic. But I think the bigger issue was that we had become so familiar with that metaphor that it seemed almost too sentimental, even saccharine—not to mention that most of us had very little personal experience with caring for sheep and found it hard to envision ourselves as that helpless lamb. But I said that if you took away the lamb and substituted instead my cat Osgar—who at that time was my only cat and was a well-known and beloved member of the seminary community—then it started to make more sense to me. I want to think of God loving, protecting, holding, and providing for me the way I take care of my cat—except even better than how I love and care for my cat. There may not be a more comforting depiction in all of scripture of the way God cares for us than Jesus claiming the role of the good shepherd, invoking the image in Psalm 23 of the Lord leading, restoring, and guiding his people like a shepherd with his sheep.

Although scripture is most often addressed to the whole community, and God is usually understood to be speaking less to individuals than to the whole people of Israel, the psalms give us those rare descriptions of a more personal connection with the Lord. Tradition credits King David as the author of Psalm 23, which is consistent with him being both a musician and a shepherd—Samuel couldn't find him to anoint him as king because he was out in the field tending his father's sheep. But we don't know for certain whether David wrote it or it was just written with him in mind. In the ancient near east it was common royal propaganda for kings to portray themselves in their role of leader and caretaker of their subjects as a shepherd protecting and providing for their sheep. For all his faults, David was considered the exemplary king of Israel; we think of him writing the psalm as a reminder that God is the ultimate king—a good king who, like a shepherd, cares for and does not exploit those who are in his charge.

But Jesus does not randomly use the language of sheep and shepherd to identify himself as king and Lord. In context, Jesus describes himself here as the good shepherd in response to finding the man who was born blind when the Pharisees kick him out of the synagogue. Jesus had restored the man's sight but had done so on the sabbath, so the religious authorities argue with both the man and his parents about whether he was even truly born blind; they insist that Jesus is a sinner because he healed on the sabbath. The man says he doesn't know whether Jesus is a sinner or not, he just knows that he used to be blind and now he can see—which certainly seems to him like something that had to have been done through the power of God. They drive the man out of the community, and Jesus finds him, like a shepherd finding a lost sheep. In contrast to the religious leaders, who are like hired hands who scatter the sheep, Jesus is the good shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep, who will in fact be executed because his acts of healing, feeding, and leading threaten the status quo.

Here Jesus restores and comforts this individual sheep who has been separated from his flock, just like the shepherd who restores and comforts the author of Psalm 23. But although the psalmist is focused on his own relationship with the shepherd, there's nothing to make us think that he is the only sheep. Jesus speaks not about one sheep but many. When he finds the man who was kicked out of the synagogue, he invites him into discipleship which means that he becomes part of Jesus' group of followers in a way that he had never been included before. Jesus doesn't just restore the man's sight, he restores the man's connection to community.

Whether you like the image of Jesus as the good shepherd, or if, like me, it would mean more to you if Jesus was holding a loud, lazy tabby cat from the Humane Society, one thing this passage teaches us is that as much as we are loved and cherished, we are not not the shepherd's only sheep. Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also…so there will be one flock, one shepherd." The love that God has for each one of us is complete, infinite, and beyond our understanding. Yet God is big enough to love every other person we will ever encounter in the same way—friends and enemies, neighbors and those on the other side of the globe, Lutherans and *not* Lutherans. If the 18 pound cat, and the other cat, and the dog can all somehow find room on my lap while I'm watching TV, God can love each of us completely and still love others along with us. We belong to one big flock. May we learn to recognize in others the precious lamb, cradled in Jesus' arms, in just the same way that Jesus holds us.