

Listening for the Shepherd
The Rev. Amy Spagna
April 21, 2024 - Easter 4B
John 10:11-18

We're a few weeks too late for April Fool's jokes, though given the gloomy state of the world right now, we could use a few laughs. The Easter season provides the perfect backdrop for laughing at some of the harsh realities of life that the resurrection has fundamentally changed. When I served on a large-ish staff in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, we took the custom of "holy humor" very seriously. Not only was our rector the Canon Foole of the diocese, owing to her singular gift for truth-telling as a Medieval court jester might have done, but we almost always introduced sermons in this season with a joke or two. With four preachers on the rota, it was always fun to hear how we all used humor differently as an entry point to what has to be the biggest practical joke of them all. In that spirit, here are 3 really bad "dad jokes" (notably the only church-suitable ones I could find!) which have some sort of connection to the gospel reading for today:

Why did the sheep cross the road? The chicken was on vacation.

What do you get when you cross angry sheep with a grumpy cow? A baaaaad moooooood.¹

Why are sheep such bad drivers? They always make illegal ewe turns!²

¹ "36 Sheep Puns That Are Perfect for Ewe." <https://www.rd.com/article/sheep-puns/> [accessed April 17, 2024].

² Maria Monrovia, "45+ Sheep Puns to Make Ewe Laugh (LOL)." <https://thoughtcatalog.com/maria-monrovia/2018/06/sheep-puns/> [accessed April 17, 2024].

All joking aside, this passage about sheep and shepherds and Jesus uniting one flock is one of the more familiar ones on the Gospel of John. It's frequently used at funerals, and even formed the backbone of an episode of *Star Trek: Voyager* – couched as "an old Earth parable" – about 20 years ago. John puts it in the context of a wider debate between Jesus and some Pharisees about blindness and authority and sin. What it does is to draw a sharp contrast between Jesus and his debating partners. Jesus is far more interested in drawing people to him, and by extension to God, than he is in maintaining a stifling *status quo* which did not, as John tends to paint it, leave much room for grace to operate.

Just going by the number of times John's Jesus challenges that pecking order, it seems to have been THE issue with which the community that produced John struggled the most. It was especially so where the question of what we'd recognize as inclusion is concerned. The practical end of it involves how to go about making the "Them" of the "Us vs. Them" theme that runs throughout John part of the "Us." Through the metaphor of the Good Shepherd, as one scholar puts it, "Jesus makes clear that the Body of Christ is incomplete; there are many who have not yet come to the knowledge of Christ and therefore have not taken their place."³

That task of integration is a matter of leadership. To frame it another way: How does one go about unifying a diverse flock, and what will it take to do it?

The concept of unifying the flock that is God's people is not new. Nor is it unique. It hearkens back to the images of David, the shepherd boy who became king, in the

³ Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, "Commentary on John 10:11-18." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-1011-18-5> [accessed April 15, 2024].

Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the prophets' critique of Israel's leadership. Ezekiel in particular draws this metaphor out in an indictment of the role which poor leadership played in the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel also details God's promises to fix it: "As I live, says the LORD God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the LORD God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them" (Ezekiel 34:8-10, NRSV).

This should sound familiar, and not only because it could be applied to any political leaders in any place and at any time. It's what Jesus is referring to when he says he is the Good Shepherd. His audience here, which is made up of highly educated people, would have recognized the reference, as well as the contrast which Jesus draws between those leaders and himself: *I'm not like those guys, who only fed themselves. I'm here to feed everyone and to make sure they get home to God's flock, where they belong.*

Just as importantly, we hear in these words that the gathering up of God's flock is not a human campaign promise to fix what's broken, either in Ezekiel's time, or in John's time, or in our own time. It's God's promise to humanity that God will act. For Jesus it means laying down his life for the sheep, for whom he had come to offer life, "... so he could take [it] up again and then, through the Spirit, spread it over all the

world."⁴ What it means for us is taking seriously the command to love and serve out in the world that we will hear at the end of this service. How it takes shape depends on us, our gifts, our inclinations, and how we will cooperate with God in putting those things to work.

That's the definition of vocation – and it is not limited only to those of us who choose to live that out in the context of ordained ministry. We all have one, and to some extent we all arrived at it by having listened to the Shepherd's voice and allowing it to lead us back home. The poet and teacher Parker Palmer writes of this process:

"Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about – quite apart from what I would like it to be about – or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

"That insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is rooted in the Latin for 'voice.' Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity."⁵

The truths and values at the heart of our identity as followers of Christ will always lead us back home – where "home" is the place where we can love our neighbors as ourselves, and can freely lay down our lives for one another as Christ laid down his life for us. They will shape how we live, if we listen long enough to let them. Even if we do

⁴ William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year B Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Easter 4." <https://billloader.com/MkEaster4.htm> [accessed April 15, 2024].

⁵ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco, California: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 4-5.

end up tripping on the proverbial banana peels that get thrown at us along the way, the Good Shepherd will be there to pick us up and get us back on the path. And that, my friends, is good news indeed.