

Here we go again with the lambs and the sheep. This week each one of our passages has something to do with the world of lambs and sheep. I thought we were here to discuss divinity, not uvinity. So why this insistent metaphor practically everywhere we turn in holy scripture? What is it with God and sheep?

John's gospel gets off to a pretty good start: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Now that I can accept! I love words, and if you tell me that the perfect words will gain me access to godliness, then Right On! Word! All we have to do is express ourselves properly enough, explicate our ideas articulately enough and we'll be on our way.

Trouble is, over the course of the story, those words, that Word goes from being language to being a human being. And by the end of things, as we read last week even beyond the grave, the Christ isn't recommending words anymore, Jesus is saying "Feed my Sheep; tend my lambs." And today, we sang together the most familiar verses in all scripture, known to Jews and Christians alike, "The Lord is my shepherd..." and we are the sheep. The visions of John of Patmos, so wondrously presented in Revelation, just full of sheep! In fact the world is saved and led...by a lamb. What is it with these sheep?

One thing we have to do is to put the writings and ourselves in context. When and where these stories came to be told and recorded, most everyone had daily contact with the sheep and/or goats and/or other cloven-hoofed animals that sustained, equipped and clothed them. As is still the case in many cultures, especially in Africa, the animals were both holy and precious. Dowries were given, and still are, in goats or buffalo. They provided wool and skins for clothing, milk and cheese for sustenance, and on very special occasions, meat for celebratory sacrifice and eating. Everyone had a direct, vital and spiritual connection with them.

How hard is it for us modern people to relate to this sense of interdependence! Without a good shepherd, these animals would be mere lion- or wolf-bait. Without the sheep, even the shepherd would be naked, hungry and ungodly. Perhaps especially in our country, where pride in ourselves is a central cultural theme – it is difficult to think about, let alone embrace, interdependence between ourselves and anything or anybody, certainly not sheep.

So it takes some hard work to find our lives in this imagery, to identify ourselves as one of these creatures God so relentlessly insists we have to be. We have to do some counterintuitive work and get out from under the burden of our pride if we want to breathe the clean fresh air of grace. That's why the teachings of Jesus are

so full of paradox: “The last shall be first,” the foolish wisdom and power in submission, the dying to live that is so central to our religious identity. Become as a child in order to be wise. All comes from God, yet we each of us make our choices. Surrender to win. God knows we have to get used to this inside-out kind of thinking if we want to be transformed

But even if we want to, or think we want to, what is it we can actually do to become sheep? And why would we, with all the lions and wolves around these days and no shepherd in sight? Jesus’ two-part formula: Believe and feed. A grain of belief, like the famous mustard seed, can grow and blossom in the human heart into a life of feeding with untold and far-reaching consequences. Like the life of a baby in Bethlehem did.

The disciples are also possessed of the power to heal, so Tabitha wakes up for Peter. The power of the risen Christ is not just an isolated historical incident, but an ongoing source of healing and nurture. Tabitha’s name in Greek is Dorcas, which is a common kind of gazelle across the north of Africa and in those days up into Mesopotamia. A beautiful creature; there’s a picture of one in our library. It is a cousin of the sheep. So our story from Acts also beckons us up onto the bovid bandwagon.

We are each other’s healers, each other’s shepherds, each other’s sheep, as long as we shall live. Every

community has the opportunity, by caring for one another, to live out this belief. Our mutual healing is not going to take the dramatic form of bringing people literally back from the grave – at least not very often. But what about the many kinds of spiritual, emotional, and vocational graves we can wallow in, that only the comfort, understanding, and supportive companionship of our fellow shepherd/sheep can help us escape? Jesus came not to abolish the human condition, but to transform it.

When Jesus tells the temple leaders, ‘You all just don’t get it, you’re not my sheep.’ He’s not excluding them, he’s merely identifying them. ‘Of course you don’t get it, because you don’t want it. I’m not going to make you,’ said, perhaps, with a shrug, like you might to a recalcitrant teenager: ‘I’m here when you want to talk.’ No one is to be excluded, ever! All are called, but few are chosen; and they are self-selected. As the early father John Chrysostom wrote, ‘They don’t believe, not because Jesus is not a shepherd, but because they are not sheep.’ Belief is an inside job. Don’t forget, shepherds don’t make sheep. Sheep make sheep.

The great Mahatma Ghandi once said he had three enemies: The first, and by far the most easily changed for the better, was the British Empire. The second, which was far more difficult, was the Indian populace he hoped to help. And the third was Mohandas K.

Ghandi, that is, himself; with him he had very little influence at all.

How do we make ourselves sheep? By being honest: “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” Instead of, “Well I would like to have stronger faith, but under the circumstances, I guess I’m doing ok.” It’s: pray to want to pray to want to pray. Sooner or later, my unbelief will get exhausted, and the clean robe will fall on my shoulders like a cloud. The yoke is easy; the burden is light.

Because we are Christ’s hands and feet and voices in the world, the meaning of Jesus’ dwelling among us as our shepherd is contained in the lives and relationships of each of us. What Christ means is as wonderfully various as the great congregation from every nation: all tribes and peoples and languages gathered before God. Sheep and shepherds all. And you will know them by their love.