



“Herding Sheep”

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Today when people are searching for a metaphor to describe circumstances and groups that are difficult to manage, they often use the phrase “herding cats.” As in, “Managing this team is like herding cats.”

Most of us know that the phrase herding cats is an oxymoron, because cats are profoundly independent beasts, and almost the only thing that one can willingly get them to do together is race to the kitchen when they hear the kitty food bag open.

When Biblical storytellers and people like Jesus were searching for metaphors to describe people and situations that were difficult to manage, they often imagined sheep and the challenges that shepherds faced.

II

While I am not an expert on sheep, and I don’t know as much about sheep as I know about some other domesticated animals, I know enough about sheep to exegete John’s gospel reading today, and to teach “Sheep and Shepherding 101.”

Most of what I have learned about sheep and shepherding I learned from my father’s accounts of raising sheep when my sister and I were too little to remember them, and from friends on neighboring farms who raised sheep when I was growing up.¹

Some “sheep basics,” as they were described to me by my father, included these key points:

- 1) Sheep are not the brightest animals on the farm, and to make matters worse, when one gets a bad idea, the others are quick to imitate the one who is behaving badly. This is because sheep are born and bred with a strong herd mentality. Sometimes this herd mentality works to their advantage, because sticking with the flock is one of the only forms of defense that sheep have. But at other times, this herd mentality can be detrimental. For example, many breeds of

¹ For more fun facts about sheep and shepherding go to: <http://www.sheep101.info/aboutsheep.html>

sheep have such a strong sense of “follow me” that they will literally follow the leader off of a cliff.

- 2) Another fundamental principal that my dad taught me about sheep is that a sick sheep is a dead sheep. It seems that physical ailments among sheep are as contagious as their notoriously negative herd behaviors. My dad used to say that the best defense against sickness in the herd was to quarantine the “sickies.”
- 3) Sheep are “grazing machines.” They will graze on average 7 hours a day, usually at dawn and dusk, but they will also eat grains. Sheep are big on *siestas* in the middle of the day. In arid climates one sheep may need up to an acre of pasture to feed on, to meet its basic needs for maintenance and growth. (An acre of land is about the same size at our church’s north parking lot.)

III

The fact that so many references are made in our scriptures to sheep and shepherds has in part to do with the fact that—to the biblical storytellers and to Jesus—sheep and shepherds demonstrated many qualities that they found inherent in the human population. The frequent references to sheep and shepherds also had to do with the ubiquity of these figures in the Ancient Near East and in first-century Palestine.

For example, in an ancient biblical nomadic family like Abraham and Sarah’s, every able-bodied person was a shepherd. Shepherding in those days involved tending and guarding the flock. Watering the sheep seemed to be the purview of girls and women, while the nomadic herding of sheep was more likely the responsibility of younger men, who guided their families’ flocks from one pasture to another, which were often several miles from their nomadic camp or settled village and had greener pastures.

Once the Hebrew people settled into towns and villages in Canaan, in the mid-Eleventh Century BC, shepherding was no longer the sole vocation of most Israelites. Only some people kept sheep, so shepherds, in those days, might be the owner of the herd, the owner’s family members, or his servants.

A shepherd’s primary role in biblical times, as today, was to protect the flock. Each animal reflected a significant financial investment for its owner. Today, sheep are selling for about \$2 a pound, which is about as high a price as farmers and ranchers have ever seen in US. The surge in prices in recent years, agriculture experts say, is due in part to the influx of Central and South American immigrants who have come to the US and brought their taste for mutton with them.²

Given that the average sheep, at market weight, weighs between 120 and 135 pounds³ the loss of a lamb at finish today would be equal to \$240–270 per head.

² <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/lifestyle/2011/03/13/ethnic-communities-help-boost-sheep-prices/>

³ <http://www.tvsp.org/picklamb.html>

While the economies and the value of money have changed considerably since the first century when John was collecting and disseminating his version of “The Life and Teachings of Jesus,” keeping sheep alive and healthy until market or slaughter was no small task, so sickness, injury, and predatory threats were a grave concern for the shepherd and his master. The most common threats to sheep (and goats) in biblical times included wild animals including lions, bears, wolves, jackals, and hyenas; theft; and extreme weather, both heat and cold.⁴

The shepherd had decision-making responsibility for the direction he would take the flock. He had to find pasture and water on a daily basis or the sheep would die. The shepherd knew the area surrounding his home base as well as a modern golfer knows his own local golf course, but in biblical times, shepherds could not rely on these pastures alone. They had to migrate seasonally to provide for their flocks when their homeland pastures became too sparse or the weather too harsh. He (or she) had to guide the flock many miles over harsh terrain, sometimes stopping in caves for protection from the elements or wild animals that would prey on the herd.⁵

The shepherd’s only weapons against these threats were his or her wits, a slingshot and stones, and a wooden stick with sharp pieces of metal protruding out of it, both of which were used to wound or frighten the predator. Shepherds also typically carried a crook that was used to rein in an errant sheep and to help rescue an animal whose leg had been trapped in the rocks.⁶

If the flock that a shepherd managed was large, requiring more than one shepherd, the normal practice was for shepherds to set up camp near water and return there with the flock at night, where they would scan the herd for sickness and injury, and build a fire to warm themselves and ward off predators. A sheepfold was often constructed at these types of campsites, and was constructed of stones. During the night, the shepherds would take turns keeping watch over the flock and warding off predators.⁷

For those who haven’t seen a sheepfold, imagine a giant corral made of rocks piled about waist high with a gate at one end. The corral was as much to keep the sheep from scattering, if startled by a howl or a crack of thunder, as it was to keep predators away, but it was not a fool-proof way of protecting the sheep from themselves or their predators.

Temperamentally, a shepherd in biblical times had to withstand, if not enjoy, the solitary life, because he (or she) would spend numerous hours, even days, in the pastures alone with the sheep. Because of the natural ability that sheep have to recognize faces and to clue in on sounds and other sensory information, sheep typically recognize their shepherds’ signs and signals, sort of like well-trained dogs or horses. Sheep, like dogs and horses, have the capacity to look and listen and respond to various commands.⁸

⁴ Madeline S. and J. Lane Miller, *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, third ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 142.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁸ *Ibid.* 144.

The breads that have the tall, twitchy ears are especially adept at sensing predators and responding to direction from their shepherd.

IV

Perhaps now we see why the shepherd and sheep metaphors were so powerful for biblical audiences—not simply because of the ubiquity of sheep and shepherd in biblical times and the similar behaviors exhibited by humans—but because of the intimacy that existed between the shepherd and the sheep, and the shepherd’s total concern for the wellbeing of the sheep.

Perhaps with all this background on sheep and shepherding we can better understand today’s gospel reading.

To begin, the **shepherd** is clearly a metaphor for Jesus, and the **sheep** are a metaphor for his followers.

A **sheepfold** is a fenced-in corral with a gate that permitted one way in and one way out, which the shepherd managed. Sheep were typically kept in a sheepfold for their own wellbeing, since there were many threats and dangers in the first century—as there are today. Examples included thieves and bandits who would steal sheep for their own use, or carnivores that would injure and kill the vulnerable.

Because many people today have drifted so far from any life experience that would help them understand the pastoral and agrarian metaphors in scripture, the truth of these passages is sometimes veiled. But now that we have been through Sheep and Shepherds 101, we can all better understand that life for shepherds and sheep were very demanding, and safety and security were not guaranteed. Such threats made the role of the shepherd all the more important, and his (or her) relationship with the sheep all the more profound.

Through growth and experience, the sheep learned the shepherd’s call and signals, and learned to build on their native capacity to trust and follow. Through the sheep’s own memory of being led and fed, and arriving back to camp safe and sound, the trust relationship between the sheep and the shepherds continued to grow and flourish. Shepherds knew the temperaments of each individual sheep, and the behavior patterns of each flock.

V

Since most of us in our congregation have little experience with nomadic or pastoral lifestyles, today I’ve spelled it out in here in “Sheep and Shepherds 101” so that we can recognize the references and metaphors that the writer used to describe Jesus’ relationship with his followers, and see how they might also apply to our lives.

We face many threats and challenges to our wellbeing as individuals, families, congregants, and community members. Predators of various types hover and howl on the edges of our sheepfold every day, threatening the whole herd and watching and waiting for an opportunity to take advantage of the weak. Some of those predators are easy to spot, because we see their faces on the “Most Wanted” lists, or we read their names in the police blotter of the papers. But other’s identities are veiled like the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Think of the things that you worry about, for yourself and your family, and for our congregation or community. In what ways have you been strengthened by being part of a human “herd,” such as a congregation and community? Or, consider whether there may have been times that you wandered too far from your family or community, perhaps trying to be too independent or ignoring what you knew was a prudent path, and found yourself facing threats that you had never imagined?

Experiences like these serve as reminders of why we set boundaries in our families, the church, and community life writ large. Experiences like these serve as reminders of why we teach our children about boundaries, and why we create structures and practices in our lives that diminish our risk and decrease the likelihood of injury and loss.

Experiences like these serve as reminders that—while we aren’t sheep, and we don’t need to stay with the herd all of the time to be safe—there are limits to what we can face on our own, and there are times when we need the comfort, support, and strength that we find by being huddled close as a people, and rely on a shepherd or two or three to keep awake and stay on watch.

Experiences of threat and injury can also be teaching and learning opportunities for us about the need for good communication skills and the importance of communicating carefully and well with each other.

Consider for a moment whether there have been times when you didn’t (or couldn’t) hear advice and missed the directions to greener pastures or living water, from a modern-day shepherd? Consider whether there may have been times when, because you were part of a family or community, someone in that group was able to say just the thing you needed to hear, in just the way that you could hear that message. Remember how it felt to be known so well and to be supported and coached so tenderly through a difficulty. Remember how healthy and effective communication helps build trust in families and communities, and how good communication keeps our human herds safe and sound.

As Christians, these ancient and modern reminders of sheep and shepherds encourage us to set our sights on Jesus’ direction and tune our ears to his commands, and when we do, we find ourselves and our flock safe and sound. Thanks be to God. Amen.