



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 8 Proper 11 (B)**

#### **Sheeple**

**RCL: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 89:20-37; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

What do you suppose are the most prevalent metaphors that we use for God? Likely Father, King, and Shepherd are in the top three, if not the top three. There are, of course, hundreds of names and images in the scriptures for God. The sheer number of images for God present in the scriptures is enough to make the mind reel. That reeling is likely purposefully sought on the part of the writers to shake us from unduly attaching ourselves to one image or another. The piling on of image after image after image for God by the scriptures seems to be a warning to be careful about getting into a spiritual rut. Just as in life, if the only tool we have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail, so too with God: if God is only and ever a King, or, take your pick—fire, wind, lover, friend—then our prayer lives get anemic. We need the full buffet of images for God to allow our prayer lives to be well-rounded and exciting. Our need to constantly try on new images for God has recently been explored by the Rev. Lauren Winner in her wonderful book, *Wearing God*.

Now, having laid the case for looking at the less-than-top-three images for God as a remedy for a boring prayer life, we really ought to examine one of those top three: the shepherd. It is used over 1,200 times in the Bible in reference to God only. It's used lots of other times in the Bible to refer to actual shepherds, but for God, it's a very, very popular image. "King" and "Lord" lord over "shepherd," at around 2,500 and 6,500 uses respectively.

First, we need to understand that these metaphors are simply that: metaphors. No one should think that God is an actual, literal shepherd. God does not own a shepherd's crook, God does not abide in fields with actual sheep. It's a figure of speech by the biblical writers to get us thinking about what God is like. But that's the thing: God is like a shepherd. God is like one who has a crook and knows how to use it. God is like one who abides out in fields with the ones for whom he cares.

Metaphors like this work the other way, too: they are for us in our daily lives. We are meant to bring the metaphors with us, to carry them, as it were. The ancients who heard this language for God would then go about their business and daily lives and — lo and behold! — they would see a shepherdess — and if they were paying attention, they might think of God. They might see the shepherdess painstakingly caring for her sheep. They might see a wayward sheep being brought back into the fold, perhaps forcefully depending

on the waywardness of the sheep, and then they might be brought to the threshold of prayer and repentance over their own wayward ways.

This is the power of figurative language for God; it can transform our daily lives into countless occasions for prayer. The problem, of course, is that most people in the modern era are unfamiliar with shepherding. Shepherding is a way of life in many parts of the world, but for the increasingly urbanized among us, shepherding is really just a quaint and sanitized notion.

Then there is the whole problem that we have with this metaphor and where we stand in it. One of the hallmarks of our post-modern age is a suspicion of authority. We do not want a shepherd, which is probably why the images of king, lord, and shepherd are so prevalent in the scriptures: even though we don't want a shepherd, we do still need one.

Besides, let's face it: if you are honest you have a shepherd of some sort or other. Go ahead, get quiet for a moment: what are those forces and individuals in your life who call the shots? Who is the one who forms your life most fundamentally? It might be a desire for perfect health, to be financially secure, it might be to be successful, desirable, or free. We all have these shepherds, probably many shepherds.

But they are false shepherds, because they cannot ultimately give what they promise.

Each of us have these shepherds, and even though we think that we are free, we do in fact serve these shepherds.

Bob Dylan, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, wrote many years ago in his song, Gotta Serve Somebody, that you:

Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk  
Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk  
You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread  
You may be sleeping on the floor, sleeping in a king-sized bed

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

This simply is a fact of life. Just as no one is an island, so is no one free from authority and these guiding influences. This is what arouses Jesus' compassion for the crowd today: they are like sheep without a shepherd. And he begins teaching them. Of course, they had shepherds, but those false shepherds had led them to seek the real shepherd.

So then, what are sheep? Since we are the sheep in this metaphor that we use for God, we ought to know. You know, don't you, that there are critics of the church who would call us disciples of Christ, "sheeple." It's meant to be a derisive term for the unquestioning following, not so much of Jesus, but of the culture warrior preachers. But in many ways, we act like sheep, we are sheeple. As the Prayer Book says, "like sheep we have gone astray."

Sheep are not known for their intelligence, but they are quite bright in their own way. While they can easily get their little horns caught in briars or get lost, it seems that most of their brains are dedicated to their flock and their shepherd.

In a flock, sheep will arrange themselves in concentric overlapping circles of sheep with the strongest and biggest sheep on the outside and the youngest and weakest sheep on the inside. We could learn from these sheep in terms of being neighbors to each other.

In addition to their ability as a good neighbor, the sheep is singularly focused on its shepherd. So much so, that the sheep learn the voice of their shepherd, his scent, and even his silhouette upon the sky as the shepherd stands on a hill. The sheep learn somehow that this one shepherd, in however he calls to them, whether through sight, voice, or smell, is to be utterly trusted – and not only that, but all other shepherds are to be mistrusted, or at least skeptically investigated.

Let's learn this skepticism from these sheep. Let's submit all those so-called shepherds who would lead us to the test of the Good Shepherd. Do these things and people that we follow offer life and significance, or are they turning us into a product? Are our shepherds leading us to life or to the slaughter?

Go, be sheeple, follow your one and only Good Shepherd who heals and teaches and then enables us to bring life and healing to our hurting world.

*This sermon, written by **the Rev. Joshua Bowron**, originally ran July 22, 2018.*