

Lessons:

Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:19-25, Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

We had been in Israel just a couple of days -- a whole bus-load of us, off on pilgrimage from Los Angeles, California, to the Holy Land -- and we were making our way through the dusty desert, south of Jerusalem -- mid-day sun beating down upon us.

That's when we first caught sight of that biblical image many of us had been hoping... if not... waiting for.

There, in the distance, was a huge flock of sheep -- and a shepherd!

Complete with a shepherd's staff and all!

And as our bus drew closer, we could see that the shepherd was beginning to move his big herd of sheep across the road -- so that our bus would have to come to a stop on this lonely, two-lane road.

Excitedly, our bus came to a halt -- and all of us pilgrims filed off.

Wide-eyed expressions painted their way across our faces -- like the Stevie Wonder character in the interlude to his classic Motown song "Living for the City" -- the poor Mississippi boy who gets off the bus in midtown Manhattan, just can't believe it as he declares:

"Wow, New York City, just like I pictured it -- "sky scrapers and everything!"

I mean, here we were, seeing, in living color, the inspiration for the 23rd Psalm -- the real-life livelihood of some of the very first witnesses to the birth of the Savior in a manger in nearby Bethlehem -- the historical underpinnings of Jesus' Great Shepherd imagery -- here, one of the most profound biblical metaphors was playing out right in front of our eyes!

The sheep and the shepherd!

Everyone grabbed their cameras -- and moment after Kodak moment was meticulously recorded.

But then, as we stood there, watching this everyday event unfold -- the imagery began to take on a much more profound flavor.

The sheep, upon closer examination, only vaguely resembled their cartoon inspired representations -- that we in the West are much more acclimated with -- those four-legged, cloud-hopping, cotton-balls -- that we're so used to seeing on Angel Soft toilet paper and Sominex sleeping pill commercials.

The wool on these sheep was far from white, it was more a yellow-brown -- and some of it so matted with mud, dust and the Lord knows what else -- that it will take the better part of an afternoon's visit to Mr. and Mrs. Clorox's basement -- before we would ever

"Good Shepherd Sunday"

Easter IV, RCL-A, Sunday, April 13, 2008

hope to see its vestiges neatly folded on the countertops in the sweater departments at Target or Macy's or Brooks Brothers.

No, we thought, on many levels sheep are not as immaculate and virginal as our sentimental sides may have been led to believe.

Sheep, in reality, are dirty and discolored. -- And this began to sink in.

Sheep are weathered, stained, imperfect, and in desperate need of cleansing.

And as the wind began to shift on that dusty, country road in southern Israel -- we also noted that sheep don't wear aftershave.

And that the sheep we ran across might do well to invest in some aftershave.

Perhaps Chanel or Ralph Lauren or some of the major fragrance manufacturers might give it a go -- or just re-position their current brands -- for the ladies, perhaps "Back to the Prairie with La Prairie" -- and for the guys, "The Original Grey Flannel"

Then as we stood there holding our noses -- we were also close enough to notice the temperament.

Sheep are very anxious animals -- They crowd together, almost on top of one another to form tighter and tighter groups -- Their beady little eyes flash from side to side, up and down, diagonally, every which way, constantly moving -- constantly worried about the world around them -- even though there's really not much to worry about.

We weren't about to hurt them -- we just wanted to watch them cross the road, take their pictures and hope the wind would shift.

But there was no re-assuring this crowd.

Each sheep exhibited its own form of skittishness, anxiety and borderline psychosis about the world around them.

Each sheep seemed immune to the desire of their surroundings to want to calm them and ease their disease.

Here we were surrounded by placid mountains, clear blue skies and the breadth of nature's desert -- yet each sheep was caught up in its own world of worry, oblivious to a serene universe which was crying out to them:

"What's the hurry? What's the worry? Everything's going to be all right"

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."

Sheep, we thought, have major trust issues.

We thought, there must be a huge market for sheep psychiatrists -- or at least sheep prescriptions -- Sheep Xanax, Sheep Zoloft, Sheep Ativan and Sheep Valium.

One of the major challenges to being a sheep, we thought, was to just calm down -- just relax -- just take in the world around, in all its providential beauty and divine design, and don't worry.

Everything's going to be ok.

Of course, one of the things that keeps them so anxious, we observed, was their intelligence quotient -- which, we wondered, ever got out of the single digits?

Not only were they not the whitest tissues in the box -- but these sheep weren't the slickest tonic in the barber shop either.

There they go, we watched, these poor uninformed animals -- unable to perceive even the most blatant attempts on our part to be friendly and non-threatening.

As we watched we talked about stories that we'd heard -- of daydreaming sheep who find a little plot of grass to munch -- and quickly forget about time, and the rest of the flock -- and get lost and fall prey to the elements or predators.

We talked about the tragic comedy of the un-sheared sheep caught in a thunder storm; whose rain-soaked wool causes them to tip over in a circumstance that makes it impossible for them to get back up all by themselves.

Tsk, tsk, tsk, we thought -- those poor, dumb sheep.

However, we noticed, their lack of intelligence sure doesn't shut them up.

That's another thing you notice when you're stopped by a sheep-block in Southern Israel on a hot February afternoon -- Boy, sheep sure make a racket -- it seems that they have a lot on their mind.

We came to believe that when sheep talk they're probably not curing cancer or discussing foreign policy -- they're probably just saying whatever's on their mind:

"Hey, get outta my way!" -- "Stop stepping on my hoof!" -- And, "Hey baby get back here, wanna get lucky?"

Although we didn't have our sheep translator handy -- to us, it sounded like these sheep did an awfully lot of complaining -- all in accordance with their intellectually-challenged life circumstance that limited them to instinct alone.

Boy, it must be hard to have to listen to that all day -- sheep complaining about their health, their hunger, the humidity and their hemorrhoids -- that job as a Shepherd must be tough -- as we watched the shepherd walk right past us with his flock -- Shepherd next to sheep.

Do they even know how much smarter he is than they are?

Do they have any idea what kind of power, to love and to hate, to guide and to guard, that this Shepherd has over these sheep?

How incapable these sheep are -- of comprehending even the most primitive concepts that this Shepherd might want to communicate?

He can't explain the world to them. -- They don't get calculus.

He can't explain his motivations to them. -- They comprehend few things beyond basic animal impulse.

The gap between Shepherd and sheep is not one of degree, we thought, it is one in kind. -- In some profound ways, the Shepherd is wholly other than the sheep.

“Good Shepherd Sunday”
Easter IV, RCL-A, Sunday, April 13, 2008

But what he does do is show them that the trust they place in him is not ill-founded.

What little they know of the Shepherd, they can trust.

The Shepherd can communicate his care for the sheep. -- The Shepherd can communicate his devotion to the sheep. -- The Shepherd can communicate his love to the sheep.

And while these sheep didn't seem to be able to get much, they did seem to get that.

And so our attention turned to the Shepherd.

A few moments ago, when the bus had pulled up, we started to talk about our ideas of shepherds -- what did we Los Angelenos know about shepherds?

We had very little to go on here -- After all, our most frequent contact had been in the Christmas pageant -- as little kids dressed up in bath robes put kitchen towels on their heads -- and they shuffled with their staffs across the sanctuary.

After all, as Kitty Kenning can tell us, these little thespians seem to be the ones most in need of shepherding themselves...

So we had pre-supposed expectations here.

We lifetime urban dwellers thought real shepherds, as described in the Scriptures, were much different.

They were the original dog whisperers -- Cesar Millan incarnate -- able to use their voice as a coercive force -- an audio cattle prod -- to steer the sheep by subtle intonations and mere hints of suggestion.

And the sheep, whose hearing must be alien-keen -- able to intercept messages better than a roomful of N-S-A surveillance hacks -- able to pick up even the most delicate and understated of motivations.

In the Bible, these sheep immediately obey -- even anticipate the will of the Master.

And here, as we stood there on that dusty road, we came to the stark realization that we were dead wrong.

Do you know the most common method of crowd-control, direction and course-correction that a shepherd uses?

Actually there are two: He kicks them, and he hits them with a stick.

Wow, we thought. -- I thought the sheep would hear his voice and immediately obey?

Not on that day.

The reality is that sheep seem to need more severe coercion -- and the shepherd gives it to them.

It seems that sheep have their own agendas -- they don't always want to do the will of the Shepherd!

“Good Shepherd Sunday”

Easter IV, RCL-A, Sunday, April 13, 2008

They have a propensity to think their way is the best way -- They have a predisposition to believe that they've got this whole "living in the desert" thing all worked out.

And so when they try to go it alone, they might not listen to the shepherd's lone voice.

They might need some further attitude adjustment.

As we stood there watching the Shepherd prod those sheep across the road -- kicking with his boots and hitting with his staff.

And we watched the sheep react --

"Why is he hitting me?" they must have thought --

"Why can't I go this way or that way?" --

"Why can't we stop for a drink?"

"I have to go to the bathroom!"

"When are we finally going to get there?"

"Why can't I walk next to my friend?"

"Why can't I go my way?"

And there's the Shepherd -- He's not trying to hurt the sheep -- He's not trying to be vindictive, or cruel or malicious. -- There's that Shepherd -- doing the best he can just to keep that whole sheep universe together.

I'm sure that Shepherd would've loved to put down that staff and trade in those boots for a pair of sandals -- and simply resort to whispering.

I'm sure it's been tried. -- But sooner or later, shepherds must've figured out that it doesn't work.

Oh sure, the sheep may know the Shepherd's voice -- but how much easier would their lives be if the sheep actually obeyed the Shepherd's voice?

How much hitting and kicking and course correction could be avoided if the sheep just did what they were told?

How much of their own pain and punishment do they bring on themselves -- and how much of it could they get out of, if they would just pipe down and listen instead of talk?

And that's the message of Good Shepherd Sunday: Jesus, the Good Shepherd has a voice -- a voice He wants us to hear.

"He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

Since the very beginning, the Bible says, that voice has been heard.

-- The universe was created by it

-- Adam and Eve walked through the Garden of Eden listening to it

-- And that same first couple was banished from that same garden by it.

-- The voice has spoken atop mountains

-- through prophets

-- and out of the wilderness.

-- It has come down through the ages through sages, saints and even sinners.

Indeed, that voice is still speaking today.

“Good Shepherd Sunday”

Easter IV, RCL-A, Sunday, April 13, 2008

And our job is to listen.

What is that voice saying to us?

As we go through the week ahead -- let's try this:

Let's listen for the voice of the Shepherd

-- It comes through children, nature, even our iPods-

Let's take time,

before bed, in the car, while waiting in line at the store-

There's no predicting where that voice will come from.

But we do know that it will come -- and when it does come,
may we listen and obey.

Amen.