

Pastor Gail Duba
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“Sheep without a Shepherd”

Pentecost 8B
Mark 6:30-34/53-56

Grace, peace & mercy from our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ. Let us pray. Lord in your mercy grant us the desire to grow closer to you through your teaching & your example. We thank you for your care when we have wandered like “sheep without a shepherd.” Forgive us when we have not trusted your providential care of our lives. Anselm of Canterbury prayed, “Teach us to see you and reveal yourself to us as we seek. For unless you instruct, we cannot seek You and unless You reveal Yourself we cannot find You. Let us see You in desiring You; let us desire You in seeking you. Let us find You in loving You; let us love You in finding you.” Amen

I truly began to understand more of the stories & images from the Bible that included sheep and shepherds and bringing the sheep into the fold, when David and I lived in Saudi Arabia for two years. The majority of the people in Saudi Arabia do not live in cities, but in small villages and many people are among the nomadic Bedouin of the desert. At that time, David was an ecologist, and our portion of the project that he'd been hired for was to study the agricultural productivity of the land and the herding practices of the Bedouin. One of the ways that we accomplished this was to select 15 Bedouin families. We first got their permission to follow them for two years. We selected 30 lambs from each herd and we marked them with ear tags. Let me tell you, in the desert with nomadic herders, this was easier said than done. We were able to follow through with about 10 groups, but not without a lot of challenges in both finding them, catching the lambs, weighing them & gaining the confidence of the Bedouin herders. One practice of the Bedouin we came to learn about was a fancy “shell game” they played with the flocks. The government wanted to distribute some of the oil money to the average people. The way they had determined to get money to the Bedouin was to give them a yearly subsidy based on the number of sheep they had in their herd. Many of the Bedouin are in the same tribe & they had figured out that if the government inspector was coming on Monday to count your herd, you could “borrow” 50 or so of your cousin's herd to obtain a larger count. Next week when the inspector was counting your cousin's herd, you loaned him 50 or so of your sheep. What we could never figure out was how they knew which sheep belonged to whom. How did they get the correct number back? If they had not recognized their own sheep, they could have easily left some behind and ended up with “sheep without a shepherd.” But the sheep did recognize their shepherd and heard their shepherd's voice and they returned with their shepherd to their own fold. Every sheep was with his shepherd. It was amazing to watch!

And so it is with great interest that we read our gospel text for today. What does it mean to be “without a shepherd?” Sheep without a shepherd stray helplessly and are bound to wander into the desert, to be caught by a wolf, or to die from lack of water. In the first portion of this text, we are told of the time when the disciples have come back from their first mission trip. Jesus had sent them out two by two and they came back excited about the events that had taken place when they had taught among the people in the region of Galilee. Earlier in this chapter of Mark, we are told that, “They went out & proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed many who are sick & cured them.” They had now returned from their journey and were in need of a rest, for “many were coming & going & they had no leisure even to eat.” Today we would say they need a staff retreat. So they attempted to get some time away by heading out to a deserted place, somewhere like the retreat center at Cannon Beach. But the crowds of people got wind of it and followed them there. When Jesus & his disciples got there, they were met by a crowd of people in need--in need of physical, psychological & spiritual healing. It would have been understandable if Jesus would have said, “OK, you sons & daughters of Israel. My disciples & I are weary. We will help you next week. Please see my appointment secretary & he’ll set up a time for you.” But that isn’t how Jesus worked. We read, “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them many things.” The image here is one of great human need and Jesus as the one who, despite his fatigue & his desire to be along with his disciples, reaches out to the needy. Luke says, “He began to speak to them of the kingdom of God.”

At this point one might have expected Jesus to begin healing. But Mark said that Jesus “began to teach them many things.” Later, he will heal many, but right now, right after he has seen the crowds as sheep who get lost, particularly when they have no shepherd, Jesus begins to teach. Our situation today, as Christians in this diverse culture, we sometimes resemble sheep without a shepherd. We find ourselves in a wilderness where many lose their way. Sometimes we feel like “strangers in a strange land,” like people in exile. There are many in our society who are in pain. Sometimes it is from a situation that has existed for a long time, perhaps the pain of being in a physically or verbally abusive relationship. Sometimes it is from lifestyle choices that we’ve made, or fallen into--such as alcohol or drug addiction. But often we are hurting because “we are wandering like lost sheep in the desert.” We are confused. We are lost. Sometimes it is because we are sick at heart; we often do not know the true meaning of life. We find in Mark 6 that there is a hunger for bread, but also a more substantial hunger for “every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

When we come to the altar later for Holy Eucharist, we come with open hands which helps us to receive the elements of communion. Holy Communion is transformative. We live in a culture in which we are trained to grab, seize, and to hold on tight. In our church, we are taught the open-handed gesture that is necessary to confess emptiness, hunger and the need to receive a gift from God. We call this GRACE.

The church forms a culture that is counter to the world's way of doing things. The church does not simply reach out to speak to the dominant culture; it seeks to disrupt that culture by rescuing some from it. We make every effort to bring and enfold people into a new culture which is called the "Kingdom of God." It is God's way with the world, the appointed means by which Christ is bringing all things unto himself. This "Kingdom of God" culture asks us daily to probe the question, "Who is our shepherd?" To whom do we give our trust, our faith, our gifts of tithes & offerings, and our love and our lives?

Because we live in a culture of competing ideals, excessive "me-isms," easy access to alternative means of dulling our sense of "right," we in the church need to be acutely aware of what Jesus first did with the people, "he began to teach them many things." Our intent is not only to teach the stories of our faith, but to form each of us into a way of life that we could not have known without Christian formation. Marva Daun, Christian theologian says "The Christian community is an alternative society. Rather than consume the Christian faith as a set of interesting ideas to be affirmed, we must understand our faith as a set of practices to be taken into our core, a set of habits to be assimilated into our very being."

In Mark 6, Jesus & his disciples have gone out to the desert to be alone. With so much human need & pain pressing in upon them, they need for a respite from the work of ministry. He begins to teach, as Jesus so often does. Jesus is the teacher. His disciples are learners. Later he will miraculously offer the people food. He will heal. But first he will teach. He will teach them words of life that will enable them to know the secret of what is afoot in the world, enable them to lay hold of their lives so they will cease to be ruled by the principalities & powers of the present age. Jesus' good news finds them in the lostness. He becomes their shepherd in teaching them.

So we must also ask ourselves, "Who is our shepherd? Where do we put our trust?" Do we put our trust in our own understanding or in the Lord's understanding? In our own powers, or in the power of God? In our own desire to save ourselves, or in Christ's death & resurrection which saves us brings us to eternal life. And so like the sheep in the desert of Saudi Arabia --May we know our shepherd, put our trust in him, have faith in him, live our lives according to his plan, & rise with him at the Judgment Day to eternal life. We must give our life to God. AMEN.