

Dances with Sheep

[John 10:1-10]

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

K Karpen, Sunday, April 17, 2005

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"The shepherd calls his own the sheep by name, and leads them out...he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice...I am the good shepherd."

The other day I went to a place to have some bloodwork done. After waiting for a while, my first stop was at a desk where a friendly receptionist took down all sorts of information and plugged it into a computer. The computer then spat out some paper which the receptionist passed along to the nurse who was going to draw the blood.

I went into a little cubical with the nurse and prepared myself spiritually for the inevitable. But nothing happened. Instead, the nurse looked at the paper. Then she looked at me. Then she looked at the paper again. Finally she asked, "What's your name?" I told her. "And how old are you?" I told her. She said, "I'm glad I asked. It says here you were born in 1901. I said, "I've been feeling old, but not that old."

She finally decided to believe me, and not the piece of paper. And she handed me the paper and said, "You'd better look over the rest of this just in case." I read it carefully, and it looked pretty good. The part I liked best was way down at the bottom where all the insurance information was. Under "name of responsible party," the insurance company had listed Harold Karpen, my 3-year-old son. For a second, I felt this huge wave of relief.

Most days I feel responsible for everything. I feel like I'm held responsible for everything. I'm always the responsible party. How wonderful of my insurance company to say that in this area of my life, they had decided to hold Harry responsible. It's in that context that I come to the Good Shepherd passages in the Gospel of John.

"The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd, and the sheep hear the shepherd's voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice...they will come in and they will go out and they will find pasture."

Ah to be a sheep! To be a sheep! To have a shepherd figuring it all out. To have a shepherd taking care of it all. To have a shepherd listed as the responsible party. And all we have to do is follow the voice. And all we have to do is come out, is follow. And all we have to do is come in and go out and we will find pasture.

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Of course there is a big part of us that bristles at the idea of being a sheep. We think of sheep as mindless, brainless. We think of sheep as being timid and afraid of everything. We think of sheep-ness as sameness, conformity, docility, and we're not that! Except when we are.

I was on jury duty this week. That'll make you feel like a sheep. At one point 40 of us were called out for a "voire dire," a jury selection, except that the voir dire was to take place in the courthouse across the street. And all of us who had come together from the far corners of Manhattan began to bleat quietly. "Across the street? What do you mean across the street?"

A court officer announced that he would be shepherding us on our journey across the street. But when we got down to the lobby he wasn't there! He'd gotten stuck on a slower elevator! "He isn't here! What do we do? Didn't he say he'd take us? Should we wait? Should we go?" Thank God our shepherd showed up 20 seconds later, and we were gently led outside and across the street, baa-ing quietly.

The thing about sheep is that they're not really like that at all. Sheep are very independent. That's the whole problem. They each have their own idea of things. Hence the old Russian proverb, "Without a shepherd, sheep are not a flock." Sheep have close to no herding instinct. If you want animals with a herding instinct, animals that instinctively know how to hang together, try wolves. Wolves pack. Sheep scatter.

Sheep are all over the place. Sheep are independent creatures. And that's good and bad. I think that's why they have sheep dogs who retain a bit of that wolf-pack instinct.

I think about sheep I've admired over the years. I think of sheep like AJ Muste, the pacifist and labor organizer who had a holy, sheepish way of wandering off on his own. During the Vietnam War, Muste would stand by himself across the street from the White House, holding a candle, night after night after night.

Mostly, people ignored him, but one time a reporter asked him, "Do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here alone at night with a candle?" "Oh no," he said. "I don't do it to change the country. I do it so the country won't change me."

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I think of sheep like E. B. White, the great author and essayist, who both loved and was troubled by the herding instinct embodied in our form of government, and who wrote in the wake of World War II, "Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half the time."

And a year later, at the start of the McCarthy era, "I am a member of a party of one, and I live in an age of fear. My party is becoming unsettled; and my fears have been raised."

Lord, make me a sheep. Lord, make me such a sheep.

I'd rather be an independent-minded sheep than a pack-minded wolf, excusing my mindless brutality by the behavior of my sisters and brothers on either side.

Make me a sheep! But give me a shepherd.

Give me a little guidance. Give me someone to point out the faith. Give me someone to point out the pasture and help me know when it's safe to lie down. God, give us a shepherd who leads and sings to and dances with sheep.

God, give us a shepherd who knows that we can be among the nations as savvy sheep rather than as wayward wolves. God give us a shepherd, who has a word for those who add field to field & house to house and devour the homes of widows—and it's not sheep.

God give us a shepherd to give us the sensitivity of sheep and not the certainty of wolves. To teach us that the opposite of faith is certainty, not doubt. Teach us to live for righteousness. "For we were going away like sheep but now we are returning to the shepherd of our souls."

And Rise up, O sheep, because we are each of us a responsible party, responding to our shepherd and to the needs of his flock.

Rise up, O sheep! Who know we too are called to give our lives for God's sheep.

Rise up, O sheep, because the wolves are ever ready to circle and to pray upon the lost & vulnerable.

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Rise up! O sheep, and hearken to the shepherd of your souls.

Rise up! O sheep, and baa to your neighbors the peace of the Good Shepherd.

Peace be with you.

