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Sermon 25 April 2021

Title: The sheep, the Shepherd, and the shameful servant

- Good morning church! It is so good to have you join us on this fourth Sunday of the Easter season. Hasn't it been a beautiful week here in God's country? It's like nature itself is celebrating the resurrection all around us--Seems like every day there's a new tree that's leafed out or some new flowers blooming--The poet EE Cummings wrote that Spring was like a hand that comes out of nowhere and rearranges things in a shop window while people stand and stare. And that's a great metaphor with which to describe what's happening all around us these days.
- You know, as a person who does a lot of writing, I love a good metaphor. A good metaphor is a very helpful thing. Whether writing a poem or a song, or preaching a sermon, or even teaching—about any subject, from motorcycle maintenance to postmodern philosophy to contemporary Continental cooking—a good metaphor can help your reader or your listener or your student grasp an unfamiliar concept or experience by relating it to something they already know about. And that's all a metaphor is, really, a way of connecting one thing with another and pointing out that there are similarities between them. You are certainly familiar with some famous and very powerful metaphors, like when William Shakespeare says that all the world's a stage, and we are merely players, he's using metaphor to say that the world is like a stage and we are like the players that live out their roles on that stage—or when Isaiah says that God is the potter and we are the clay, he's letting us know something deep and elemental about the relationship between God and humanity.

- A simile is a kind of metaphor that literally says one thing is LIKE another—a simile would say God is LIKE the potter rather than God IS the potter—but those really mean the same thing when you get right down to it.
- Robert Burns gave us two very memorable similes when he wrote: O my Luve is like a red, red rose, That's newly sprung in June; O my Luve is like the melody, That's sweetly played in tune.
- And there are many others we could name, like the famous observation that Forrest Gump makes when he says: Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get
- But not all metaphors and similes are quite so successful as those we've mentioned. I have taught composition and creative writing classes in my previous life as an English professor, and it can be challenging to teach students how to write using metaphor appropriately and effectively. Inexperienced or unskilled writers can come up with metaphors like these, that just don't quite meet the mark
  - Here's one: Her eyes were like two brown circles with big black dots in the center.—That's a good effort, but not quite
  - Here's another: He was as tall as a 6-foot 3-inch tree.
  - And then there's this one: John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who had also never met.
  - And one last one: The plan was simple, like my brother-in-law Phil. But unlike Phil, this plan just might work.
- I actually think that one is pretty good.
- One of my favourite poets, Ogden Nash, wrote a poem called "Very Like a Whale" in which he says he thinks maybe writers use too many metaphors and similes and maybe

they ought to be more literal, more straightforward in communicating what they're trying to say.

- That poem starts like this:
  - “One thing that literature would be greatly the better for  
Would be a more restricted employment by the authors of simile and  
metaphor.  
Authors of all races, be they Greeks, Romans, Teutons or Celts,  
Can't seem just to say that anything is the thing it is but have to  
go out of their way to say that it is like something else.”
- And then Nash gives us an example of what he means by referring to a poem written by Lord Byron—that's George Gordon Byron—and Byron wrote a poem called The Destruction of Sennacherib, and it tells a story from the Old Testament—it's described in 2 Kings and Isaiah—about how the Assyrian army tried to lay siege to Jerusalem and failed—Sennacherib was the Assyrian King—and Lord Byron describes the Assyrian army coming down on the people of Israel like a wolf attacking a flock of sheep—the first two lines of Byron's poem say: “The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold, and his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold”
- But Ogden Nash takes issue with the way Byron metaphorically describes what happened, and Nash asks in his poem:

“What does it mean when we are told

That that Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold?

In the first place, George Gordon Byron had enough experience

To know that it probably wasn't just one Assyrian, it was a lot of

Assyrians.”

- And he goes on complaining about Byron's technique, and wonders what he could have meant. Nash writes:

- "Now then, this particular Assyrian, the one whose cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold,

Just what does the poet mean when he says he came down like a wolf on the fold?

In heaven and earth more than is dreamed of in our philosophy there are great many things.

But I don't imagine that among them there is a wolf with purple and gold cohorts or purple and gold anythings.

No, no, Lord Byron, before I'll believe that this Assyrian was actually like a wolf I must have some kind of proof;

Did he run on all fours and did he have a hairy tail and a big red mouth and big white teeth and did he say Woof Woof?

Frankly I think it is very unlikely, and all you were entitled to say, at the very most,

Was that the Assyrian cohorts came down like a lot of Assyrian cohorts about to destroy the Hebrew host.

But that wasn't fancy enough for Lord Byron, oh dear me no, he had to invent a lot of figures of speech and then interpolate them,

With the result that whenever you mention Old Testament soldiers to people they say Oh yes, they're the ones that a lot of wolves dressed up in gold and purple ate them.

That's the kind of thing that's being done all the time by poets,

from Homer to Tennyson;  
They're always comparing ladies to lilies and veal to venison,  
And they always say things like that the snow is a white blanket  
after a winter storm.  
Oh it is, is it, all right then, you sleep under a six-inch blanket of  
snow and I'll sleep under a half-inch blanket of unpoetical  
blanket material and we'll see which one keeps warm,  
And after that maybe you'll begin to comprehend dimly  
What I mean by too much metaphor and simile.”

- Ogden Nash, at least under the guise of the narrator of this particular poem, does not care for too much metaphorical language, and so I suspect that if he were forced to choose, he would probably prefer the Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, over the Gospel of John. Because John, in his gospel, loves to use metaphor and simile—and in John’s gospel we see that he also remembers and gives us the details of a lot of the metaphors and similes that Jesus uses when he speaks, because Jesus, particularly as John describes him, loves a good metaphor, too—of course, even in the synoptic gospels Jesus speaks in parables all over the place, saying things like the Kingdom of Heaven is “like” a mustard seed or a pearl or a treasure hidden in a field
- And today we are going to look for a few moments at this passage in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s gospel, and we’re going to explore the metaphors that we find here
- Now John doesn’t tell us exactly where Jesus and those around him ARE in these verses in chapter 10, but I like to imagine that Jesus might be walking in an area not too different from the area around Largs, where you might see walls and gates and sheep and maybe someone working in the field where the sheep are—Pastor Tasha and I, like

many of you, love to take long walks around our beautiful countryside, and we see these kinds of things, and I like to imagine that as Jesus walked and saw different things he would use them to teach those around him about who he was and what he was sent to do

- So here in Chapter 10 we see Jesus using the words “I am” with a couple of metaphors to describe Himself—He tells us in verse 7, “I am the gate for the sheep”—but then in verse 11 he says “I am the good shepherd”—and it gets a little confusing, as metaphors do—because both can be true because we’re not being literal—a gate and a shepherd are not the same thing, but Jesus can be like the gate, and like the shepherd—and he can also be like the light and the vine and the bread of life as John tells us elsewhere
- But I want us to focus on verses 11 through 18 this morning, where we find four metaphorical components to what Jesus is saying—four characters in the story he is telling—and we find them listed, really, one after the other in verses 11 through 13. There we read that Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd.” That’s the first metaphor—the good shepherd. Let’s read on: “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” There’s our second component, our second character, characters, really—the sheep.
- Now verse 12: “The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep” there’s our third character, the hired hand, who “sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.”
- And there’s our fourth character—the wolf. And then Jesus gives us a little more information about that hired hand in verse 13 when he says: “The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.”
- And I’d like for us to consider these four components of this narrative that Jesus is telling these folks—and these are folks, John tells us in verse 6, who have already not

understood what Jesus said when he used a figure of speech back there—but I want to remind you that one of the things that John is doing in his gospel is showing us the things that Jesus said and did that were not understood until after the resurrection—when Jesus’ followers remembered what Jesus had said as he taught them before the crucifixion—things that they hadn’t yet understood

- So Jesus tells his audience, and us, that he is the Good Shepherd. Now to be a shepherd, good or bad, is to have a certain relationship, a certain connection, to sheep. A shepherd is the one who cares for, and feeds and nurtures, and rescues and protects, and guides and directs, sheep. Now who are these sheep?
- Well, Jesus lets us know down around verse 26, where he says to the Jews—now keep in mind that when John uses this phrase “the Jews,” he’s not necessarily talking about all the Jewish people, he’s usually just talking about the Jewish leaders and authorities, and sometimes he’s just talking about those in authority who are out to get rid of Jesus—but down near verse 26 Jesus says these words to these folks who ask him whether he’s the Messiah or not—he says “you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”
- And there it is—Jesus’ sheep, the flock of the Good Shepherd, are the ones who believe in Him, the ones who hear His voice, the ones he knows—those who follow him. The sheep of the Good Shepherd are followers of Jesus. And that was some who were there to see and hear Jesus during his earthly ministry, it is those who heard the good news of the gospel after the resurrection, those who became the Christian church as it grew, and it’s us today—and so Jesus tells his audience here in verse 16 that he “has other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” He says “I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

- John sounds a lot like Luke here—looking toward the growth and development of the church not just in Jerusalem but out into all the world—one flock, one shepherd—Jesus’ vision for the church is one of unity, even among people of different backgrounds and nationalities and traditions, even among people of differing time periods—one flock, one shepherd. The followers of Jesus, from the days of Jesus’ earthly ministry throughout the ages of history to this very day and on into the future—these are the sheep of the Good Shepherd.
- In recent years it has become a little bit of a challenge to talk about being sheep—especially to talk about how it’s a good thing to be a sheep—because calling someone a sheep has become a way to insult them, to say that they lack independence—that they are being manipulated into doing or thinking something. And so, especially during the pandemic, but it started way before that, you’ll see people who disagree with some idea or some action that is taken—whether it’s about global warming, or where COVID came from, or having to wear a mask or get the vaccine or any number of other things—and people will say things like “How can you believe that? You know you’re just being controlled by the media, or by the corporations, or by the government or SOMEBODY—there’s usually some nefarious network with malicious intent behind what they’re saying you should do or shouldn’t think—and they’ll say—you’re a sheep! You’re just one of the sheeple!
- That word “sheeple” has been around since WWII, but it’s gotten a whole lot more usage in the age of social media—and using that insult can be effective because people don’t want to think they’re being manipulated or controlled or conned—that the wool is being pulled over their eyes—and people like to think that they have some insider knowledge, some secret truth—but if people would step back and think objectively

when someone calls them a sheep, or a sheeple, and realise that the folks who use that kind of tactic are usually saying “you’re a sheep for believing what scientists or journalists or healthcare professionals or a whole host of other experts are saying—and you ought to believe ME—I don’t have any expertise but I did make a video and put it on YouTube—so don’t be a sheep, believe ME!” As if believing the opinion of experts makes you a sheep but believing some crackpot conspiracy theorist doesn’t. Now I’m not going to tell you who you should or shouldn’t believe, but if someone has to resort to insulting you by saying you’re a sheep if you don’t believe them, then they don’t have much of a case it seems to me.

- And if it makes you a sheep to believe someone, anyone, to follow their advice and to give authority to their guidance, then we’re all, every one of us, a sheep for SOME shepherd. Because we ALL get advice from somewhere—we follow somebody. And doesn’t it make sense that if you’re going to be a sheep for a shepherd, you’d want to be a sheep for the Good Shepherd? That you would hear his voice and follow Him? It makes sense to me, and if that makes me a sheep, then I’m okay with that. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, we are the sheep of the Good Shepherd.
- But Jesus tells us in verse 12 that there is a threat to the flock. Just as in that poem we talked about—the Destruction of Sennacherib—Lord Byron describes the people of God as a flock of sheep and the Assyrian enemy as the wolf, so Jesus tells us that there is a wolf who can come and snatch and scatter the flock.
- And I want you to notice that Jesus points out not one but two dangers that the wolf represents. The wolf is not only the one who comes to snatch individual sheep—to devour and destroy them—the enemy is not just an existential threat to each sheep who

would lose their very life to its appetite for destruction and death—the wolf is not just a threat because it “snatches” sheep—but also because it “scatters” the flock.

- Hear this now—it’s relatively simple to understand that the wolf represents the Evil one who through the power of sin and death can do damage to the sheep, to followers of Jesus-- one at a time-- by removing them from the flock and devouring them, but the wolf is also a threat because He scatters the sheep.
- We heard in verse 16 that Jesus vision for his followers is “one flock, one shepherd,”—that his people, his sheep would be known by their unity, their harmony, their oneness—even in their diversity, as the apostle Paul tells us, all the members of the body are not the same but every one is necessary and a valuable part—and so Jesus tells us of the other sheep who join the fold and become one flock with one Shepherd.
- But the enemy, the wolf, scatters—the wolf brings division and dissension and chaos and calamity to the flock. And you can tell when the wolf is at work in the flock, among the followers of Jesus—when the flock scatters—when division and disagreement and discord are happening—when folks are saying “you’re not like us, get out of our flock—go find your own flock someplace else”—no Jesus said “one flock one shepherd”—when we see a flock known not for its unity and diversity but for its uniformity and division—the wolf is at work.
- I heard just this week of an invitation-only gathering of folks who are trying to preserve and reclaim holiness by making sure that folks they don’t think are holy enough, or who think a little differently than they do are weeded out and removed from the church—and I have to tell you, if your “by-invitation-only” idea of holiness makes the church smaller—if it divides it—if it scatters and excludes folks who are already part of the

flock, then it doesn't take an exegetical genius to know that's the work of the wolf, not the Good Shepherd

- And there ought to be someone who protects the flock from the wolf's attack—who sees the danger approaching and takes action—and so Jesus tells us about the hired hand—and it doesn't take too much imagination to see that Jesus is talking about the religious leaders, the scribes and the priests who are listening in—some of whom, John tells us in verse 20, are about to say that Jesus is demon-possessed and shouldn't be listened to, while others say “these are not the words of a demon—can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” Opening the eyes of the blind—and demonstrating that it's the Pharisees who are truly blind—that just happened at the end of chapter 9.
- But here in Chapter 10 Jesus tells us about the “hired hand.” That's the one who has been contracted to work in the field, the one who sees the danger coming and runs off, saying “these aren't MY sheep—I'm not the shepherd—I'm out of here—I was just in this for the reward, anyway”—Jesus tells us that the hired hand runs away because the hired hand does not care for the sheep—he's just a servant—he sees the danger just like the Good Shepherd, but has no connection to the sheep—and when a flock is dependent on a hired hand for their protection and guidance, the wolf is free to snatch and scatter.
- This hired hand—these hired hands who could protect the flock but don't—these Pharisees and scribes and priests—Jesus is saying that they may be servants, but they're shameful servants because they see the danger and do nothing—they just run away. This scripture speaks to me today, and it should speak to all those who are called to shepherd a flock of followers of Jesus—we are called to model ourselves after the Good Shepherd, not just to be hired hands—shameful servants who are just looking out for

ourselves, and letting the wolf devour the sheep and scatter the flock. I'm preaching to myself a little bit this morning

- Jesus says He is the Good Shepherd. And the Good Shepherd isn't like the hired hand. The Good Shepherd also isn't like any other shepherd. When a wolf is approaching and threatening their flock, we would expect any other shepherd to pick up their crook and defend the flock against attack, to grab some weapon or find some way to scare the wolf so that it runs away, and then return to their job of watching out for danger until the next time the wolf approaches.
- But the Good Shepherd is not just any shepherd. In verse 11 Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus tells them again in verse 15—I lay down my life for the sheep, and again in verse 17: I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."
- Now we know that folks don't understand what Jesus is talking about here—about laying down his life and taking it back up again—not even his own disciples can conceive of the crucifixion and resurrection that Jesus is referring to here—and some of the Jews hear Jesus and diagnose him with demon-possession, saying he's out of his mind.
- But we know what Jesus means—Jesus is referring to the way that through the crucifixion and the power of the resurrection He will overcome the power of sin and death and Hell once and for all—the enemy will be defeated—the wolf will have been rendered powerless, and so Jesus can say in verse 27: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

- My sheep hear my voice—I know them and they follow me—like Mary at the empty tomb when Jesus called her name, Jesus’ sheep know his voice and hear it and follow it
- Can you hear Jesus’ voice this morning? If you know Jesus and He knows you, you can hear his voice, and the Good Shepherd wants to know you today. If you don’t know Him I’d invite you to just raise your hand and say “Lord Jesus I want you to be my Good Shepherd. I want to hear your voice. All we like sheep have gone astray, and I’m a sinner in need of salvation but I believe in the power of your resurrection and claim the good news of the gospel and the forgiveness of sins.” Amen.
- If you prayed that prayer then you’re one of the flock who knows the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who hears his voice—now follow Him.
- Those who know His voice can hear it—it is the voice of truth—it is the voice of righteousness; it is the voice of holiness. Above the discouraging din of disparate opinions and directions that distract our minds each day, we can hear the voice of the Good Shepherd—we hear it in the cries of the hungry and the impoverished and the imprisoned and the oppressed—we hear it in the call for justice and equality and goodness and love—it is a voice that offers peace and joy and grace—a voice that calms the storm, a voice that speaks healing into brokenness and affliction, a voice that proclaims the good news that the enemy has been defeated and eternal life is ours, right now, right here in this place and forevermore.
- Can you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd this morning? If you’re one of the sheep of His flock you can—and you will.
- I hope you’ll join us tonight for our Second Helping Bible study—we’ll be meeting at the church and on Zoom—if you plan to meet with us at the church please make sure you let us know that you’re coming so we can make the proper arrangements—we still have to

social distance and that sort of thing. But we hope to see you one way or another real soon, and until we do, may God bless you.