

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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April 17, 2016
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10

THE SHEPHERD WHO COMES

As I was counting sheep while trying to go to sleep the other night, I stopped and asked one of them why they need shepherds. In response, I got a rather sheepish look, but then came this reply: "I hate to admit it, but we are rather vulnerable creatures. There are predators that would like to attack us - it must be because we have such great taste. I have to admit that we are not fast enough or strong enough to protect ourselves and our little ones, so it is good to have a shepherd as a guard. They can build a sheepfold for us that offers us protection at night. Particularly in those places where there is not that much grass and water, we also need someone who can reliably guide us to where we can get plenty to eat and drink - that's very important. There are occasions when a member of the flock gets separated from the rest of us, so it is good to have someone with us who can get a wanderer back with the larger group. Having our eyes on each side of our heads is only natural, but that makes it difficult to walk in a straight line and we might not even see a ravine into which we could fall. When we do get ourselves into a bind, there are times we need to be rescued. I guess we also have the capacity to be just a whole flock of nerves, so it is reassuring to have a caring shepherd right there with us or else we wouldn't ever be able to go to sleep or help anyone else counting us go to sleep either."

There is a lot of shepherd and sheep imagery in the bible because sheep were and still are the primary domesticated animals raised in the Middle East region. Jesus contrasts a caring shepherd with someone who is a bandit or thief in our gospel reading today. Someone who was a good shepherd was focused on meeting the needs of his sheep. But someone who was a bandit, who would swipe sheep from the flock, was interested only in their own needs and definitely was unconcerned about the wellbeing of the sheep. We hear of Jesus using this imagery right after he had been critical of some of the religious leaders, who seemed to be more focused on their own needs and wants than on the needs of the 'flock' which had been placed in their care. But there is biblical precedent for other people in power to be compared with shepherds. Stories tell us that Israel's greatest king, David, was a shepherd as a young person, and became the model monarch because of his shepherding qualities in protecting and providing for his people. But there were and are people in power who act more like thieves and bandits.

Climate scientists have had a difficult time convincing the broader public of the realities and dangers of climate change that has been brought about primarily by the massive amounts of carbon dioxide that have been released into the atmosphere through the use of fossil fuels. The Center for International Environmental Law has recently released a report showing that the petroleum industry has been actively working to undermine the public's confidence in climate science and in the felt need for climate action for almost fifty years. Industry officials knew the use of their products would lead to vast climate change even before then.¹ Now no one would expect these corporations on their own volition to act as shepherds for the population of the world. However, their utter disregard for the health and wellbeing of all of us who happen to live in the earth's climate suggests they can be compared to the thieves and bandits who, focused only on their own profits, take away from the most vulnerable, even while hiding the effects of their actions. There are of course also political figures who do have what is closer to shepherding responsibilities who have aided and abetted those petroleum industry officials and investors who have enriched themselves while victimizing vast populations of the world. The energy that petroleum products provided was needed, but their deceitful actions have slowed what would be the competition that would come from the development of much cleaner energy, that would mitigate the causes and disasters of climate change.

With a growing realization of the harm that comes from an economy so heavily based on oil and coal energy, our session voted a few months ago to join others in encouraging our Presbyterian denomination to withdraw most of its investments in the top two hundred oil and coal companies. Our presbytery has affirmed our overture. One goal of such an action would be to encourage those companies to turn to cleaner energy sources. Certainly the church needs to be among those institutions that live out policies that show care for the very delicate balance that is a central part of a life-supporting atmosphere in the Earthly part of God's creation.

Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Abundant living goes beyond having our physical needs met, but it can't fall short of it. Unsustainable human practices are putting a strain on the balance of the created order which counter God's desire that all are to live abundantly. A good part of abundant living consists of a lifestyle that is in concert with the care of God's good created order. With the Lord as our shepherd, we can be guided toward ways of living that don't poison the water from which we drink, that don't destabilize the various fields that supply the food that is needed. The shepherd cares for the whole flock, particularly those who are the most vulnerable. We become allies of the bandits and thieves when our actions or inactions undermine the loving care of our shepherd.

Our family is at that stage of life where our youngest is in the final stages of deciding where he will go to college in the fall. A week ago Friday, I was driving Jordan to look once again at one of his two finalist schools. We had driven north and as the sun was setting, we happened to be heading east, so that the beauty of the sunset was behind us. I enjoyed glancing in my rear view mirror at the riveting sight. I don't know what it is about sunsets, but a wave of nostalgia swept over me as I thought about the many blessings our family has known and the anticipated natural changes that lie ahead. But when it comes to global environmental concerns, the changes that lie ahead are not natural. And there is good evidence that much of the beauty of creation will only be able to be experienced in our rear view mirror as we drive the next generation into a darker future. Some parental nostalgia can be a blessed thing, but I don't want environmental nostalgia for our world that is being stripped of its beauty and of its capacity to provide as established by our Shepherding God. We mustn't follow after the thieves and bandits. There is the voice of our true shepherd which we must recognize and follow. When we do, we won't need to be counting sheep in order to sleep soundly at night. "The Lord is (our) shepherd, (we) shall not want."

¹The report by the Center for International Environmental Law can be found at <https://www.smokeandfumes.org/#>