

Who cares?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2010.

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. John 10:3-4

We often hear the lament that no one cares anymore and that people are only looking out for themselves. We ask, "Where is the true sense of compassion? Who is looking out for the vulnerable people in our society? Doesn't anyone care anymore?"

The Bible contains numerous references to God our guardian and shepherd, particularly in the 23rd and 100th psalms. Just as Moses led his people through the wilderness as a shepherd leading his flock, Jesus as the shepherd of our souls encourages us to care for those who have no one else to look out for them. As a priest and pastor I have the privilege of the spiritual care of souls.

The imagery of a shepherd with his flock of sheep roaming the countryside is not immediate to our modern culture. We must look at its historical context and setting for this shepherd metaphor to be relevant. The landscape of Israel and the Holy Land is not conducive to farming, making ancient Palestine a pastoral rather than an agricultural economy. In modern Israel, I have seen weathered, leathery-faced shepherds roaming the countryside with their flocks of sheep as they have been doing since the days of old in ancient Palestine. The life of a shepherd has always been arduous. He lives out doors, braving the elements, and is never off duty. The sheep must be carefully watched and guarded as they roam about looking for grazing pastures. The shepherd must be vigilant and on guard for wolves and thieves as well as for those in the flock that may wander off.

While sheep in other countries are kept for their meat and wool, in the Holy Land they are kept primarily for their fleece. The flock remains together for years. They are given names and learn to recognize the shepherd's voice when he calls and respond only to him. He walks ahead of his flock to see that the way ahead is safe. At night, the flock is gathered into the sheepfold, an enclosure of stone with an opening for the entrance without a door. After the flock is gathered in, the shepherd lies across the entrance to guard against any predatory animals that might enter to harm or steal them. Jesus as the Good Shepherd acts as the gatekeeper, guarding us against anything that would lead us astray. He knows each of us by name and is willing to sacrifice himself for our sake.

In our own day and time, there are those who claim to be acting in our own best interests whose only motive is to exploit. The Ponzi schemes and trusted firms such as Goldman Sachs have left millions without the funds of those who trusted them. False shepherds look out for themselves while good shepherds put the needs of others ahead of their own.

You may ask why humans are compared to sheep. For one thing, sheep are quite dumb, take foolish chances and are easily led astray. We think of ourselves as highly intelligent, using our common sense, and not easily led astray. Yet, we too often behave like sheep intent on satisfying our own desires with little concern for our security that of others.

We are too easily led astray by strange voices and schemes that lead us to follow after anyone with a get-rich quick scam that comes our way.

Just as sheep hear the shepherd's voice, we must heed Jesus' call to do what is right. His call to us is to make the right choices in a confusing world. That requires shutting out all the voices that constantly tempt us to compromise our integrity. Dishonesty and unfaithfulness have become commonplace. It isn't a matter of what we can get away with but of knowing when and how to do the right thing. A good place to begin is with what the Bible teaches about right and wrong.

In the Chinese economy, the people are gradually being allowed to share in the profits of state owned farms and industries. It became apparent that if a farmer had ownership of his goat, pig or sheep, he would go to greater lengths to care for it. If the livestock is solely state owned, the hireling has no vested interest in them. Jesus as the Good Shepherd guards and tends his flock while the hireling cares nothing for the sheep in which he has no investment.

After the crucifixion, the disciples were like sheep without a shepherd. They were vulnerable, fearful and without direction. When the new Christian community was formed, the disciples not only gained a sense of identity and purpose, they were sustained by Christ's presence among them.

Because the whole Christian faith stands on the resurrection, we are the outward and visible sign of the risen Christ's presence in the world. Without him, we are like sheep without a shepherd. With him, we are empowered to take the risk of being the people of God. As witnesses to Christ's presence wherever we are, we are empowered to speak on behalf of those who can't speak for themselves.

This nation was founded on the idea of rugged individualism and while we may want to cling to that romantic notion, the reality is that if we try to go it alone we are very vulnerable. We can end up giving into irrational fears, doubts, and helplessness. Just as sheep are especially vulnerable when shorn, when our trappings of wealth, position, and status are taken away, we are faced with who and what we really are.

With Christ, we make no pretense, no excuses. We bring our vulnerable selves before him in all honesty and are redeemed and given value and worth. So, if you wonder if anyone cares, you can be assured that with Jesus as our shepherd and guide, we are the ones who care.