

CUMC Sermon April 25

John 10:11-18

“The sheep, the hired hands...and the wolf?”

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Let's start our reflection on scripture by going on a bit of an imaginative journey back in time. Come along! It's easy, you don't have to pack your bags. Let's just imagine. Let's imagine ourselves in the city of Rome about 200 years after Jesus was crucified. Let's imagine we are in the place of aqueducts and the Coliseum, walking at night beyond the city walls. We are holding torches to light our way. We are looking for an opening into the vast underground burial tunnels known as “catacombs”, that were carved into the soft volcanic rock around the city. At this time, the Roman leaders had outlawed burials within the city limits, and Christian religious gatherings were illegal.

So in order to worship God, we meet up underground, amidst the burial niches of San Callisto, a catacomb named after our dear leader, Callixtus, who was martyred for his faith. Here, with the dead, we the living, gather to sing and pray and tell the stories of Jesus--whose image has been etched into the ceiling above us. This overarching image reminds us that God's love extends beyond death into the very life of God.

So we look up and see in the torchlight one of the earliest portrayals of Jesus--as a young man, walking amongst the sheep and carrying a lamb over his shoulders. Here, underneath the city of chariots and swords, in the dark, flickering quiet, we are reminded, that Jesus is the good shepherd.

Well, here we are! It's Sunday! Here we are again. We gather today in our holy virtual space to pray, sing and experience God's renewing Spirit in our worship. And do we need renewal! What a week it has been! Think about it. We've had the quick verdict announced in the Chauvin trial; black brown and white people hugging and praying in George Floyd Square, yet more shootings of unarmed black and brown adults, youth and children across the country; 20 year old Daunte Wright killed in Brooklyn Center, protestors and National Guard on the streets; Daunte's memorial service at Shiloh Temple, and all of this wrapped up in the ongoing scourge of the pandemic. I hope you have gotten or are planning to get a vaccine!

Well, there was all of that and more... This past week, Thursday, April 22nd, was the 51st anniversary of Earth Day, the largest civic event on the planet! The theme this year was “Restore Our Earth!”. Such an important calling, along with the calling we were also hearing--still are hearing--to “Restore Our Justice”!

Restore Our Earth--Restore Our Justice! Two intertwined, interdependent themes of ecojustice and social justice. Care for the health and wellbeing of our planet's living environments, and care for the health and wellbeing of people. Hear the two emphases?

Environment and People.

Or we might say, Nature and Society.
Planet and civilization.

Sometimes we think of them as separate spheres

Sometimes we think of them as competing interests, an either/or.

Optimists often think People are in control.

Pessimists often say that Nature is in control.

But thankfully we are hearing a new vision--especially from people most vulnerable to the erosion of environment and justice. We are hearing that these two spheres of concern have to be held together for the sustaining and thriving of life as a whole on Planet Earth.

Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, a young black marine biologist and co-author of the book *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*, writes: "Climate change is a powerful 'threat multiplier' making existing vulnerabilities and injustices worse...especially for girls and women of color, those in the global South, and those who are rural or Indigenous...All is connected. That's the truth of the world's wisdom traditions, and increasingly, of scientific findings. No single thing, no species or ecosystem, community or culture is safe when so much hangs in the balance. We unravel as one or we regenerate as one...Every tenth of a degree of warming, every centimeter of sea level rise, every increasingly unnatural disaster, every species, every life--all of it matters." (xviii, 371).

So in this week of so much death and life, when we try to hold in one hand the honoring of social justice and in the other hand we hold the care of Earth, we are beginning to understand that "Black Lives Matter" is the essential key to how our collective work and vision can bring forth safety for life as a whole.

So what does this mean for us today as we reflect on our biblical story? How might our two lenses of ecojustice and social justice help us see new meaning in the words of Scripture? How do we interpret the scripture for our time and reality?

As you know, the Gospel of John repeatedly uses the Hebrew phrase "I am" to re-frame the relationship of God, Jesus and the world. For example, Jesus says, "I am the vine..."; and "I am the way..."; "I am the gate..."; "I am the resurrection...". All of these "I am" analogies convey to us that what is known about Jesus, can then by faith be applied to knowing God.

So today we have the analogy of Jesus as the good shepherd. He is the one who truly knows the sheep and they know his voice. He's the shepherd who leads the sheep to green pastures and beside still waters. The good shepherd risks his life and lays it down to protect the sheep.

Now when we hear these words, we usually place ourselves in the figure of the sheep. We think of ourselves as sheep of God's flock. We humans are vulnerable, sociable creatures in need of protection. All of us have a bit of vulnerability deep down within ourselves. The Covid pandemic has shown us our vulnerability. Even if we didn't get the virus, or have symptoms, we still had moments of fear, worry and anxiety. At some point, we have had that moment of awakening when we realize we live day to day exposed to that which is greater than ourselves--other people, nature, and the Holy. We realize the human experience of what Friedrich Schleiermacher called "absolute dependence."

But in the analogy of sheep and shepherd, there are other roles that John animates. This day, we may want to consider that there are times when we may be the hired hands. Think about it. We, at times, can act like hired hands. See hired hands think they are working with the flock, but in fact it's for the short term, or out of duty, not

because of any deep attachment or belonging with the sheep. In fact, when things get hard or scary, when there's even the slightest hint of danger, the hired hands back off or flee. They want to protect their own lives, their real investments, rather than stick their necks out with the sheep. Hired hands are like people who say they are allies, like white allies, yet when the going gets tough, they suddenly have other reasons to tend to, they fade away, or side with the powers that be. There's a bit of hired hand in us too.

But then in the analogy, there's also the wolf. The wolf comes to scatter the flock and snatch up a sheep. The wolf preys upon the vulnerable looking for those who are afraid, who don't have the resources to keep up, to fight back, or assert their dignity.

We can think of the wolf as the sexual predator who grooms children, youth or vulnerable adults. The wolf may be anyone in power who bullies or seeks to control other people.

We also have to admit, there has been a wolf-like legacy to our American history where people of European descent have taken up land and extracted resources from Indigenous people who were removed, scattered apart on 'reservations', and assimilated or massacred. Wolves in slavers' clothes preyed on vulnerable Africans enforcing their physical labor and reproductive labor to build an economy of extractive wealth, leaving vulnerable people with centuries of trauma and financial insecurity. And then there's the corporate wolves, hungry for extracting from the sea, forests, farmlands and underground what is desired for today, without responsibility for the destruction, unhealthy bodies, pollution, or toxicity that remains. While we as individuals may not see ourselves as wolves directly, we are beginning to understand how we do participate in vast systems of wolf-like relations with vulnerable people, species, and environments. Climate chaos is symptomatic of our life-threatening ways of being. Thing is, ultimately, in the decades ahead, we all will be vulnerable across the planet.

So there's several roles to play in this gospel story. With the analogy in the Gospel of John, we can see that we have parts of our lives that comprise all of them--we are like the sheep, the hired hands, and also the wolf.

Well, let's not forget the Good Shepherd. The good news today is that there is a good shepherd who bears for us the love, justice and mercy of God. Jesus is the good shepherd, the one whose grace is wide enough to protect the inherent dignity of the vulnerable, forgive the faithlessness of those who flee, and satiate the hungry with a compassionate, respectful and responsible way of being in the world. Following the way of Jesus, we find ourselves on a new path, one in which we can see there's enough for all, and we can restore the Earth and the justice so needed for today and tomorrow. Let us trust the way of the Good Shepherd.

Amen.

Resources:

1. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/image-gallery/s/shepherd-werlin>
2. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson, *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage and Solutions for the Climate Crisis* (One World, 2020).