

## ***Seeking an unexpected God***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

January 3, 2021

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

One other portion of Scripture, it comes from the letter of 1 John chapter 3:

*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another... Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth ...*

*And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.<sup>1</sup>*

There it is again – that word, “Love”. It is an active, not at all passive or abstract, version of love. We are called by the writer to love not just in one isolated action, but in our day-to-day living.

Today, this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Easter season, is often called “The Good Shepherd” Sunday. Imagining God or Jesus as a protective shepherd is a metaphor; and, of course language is so limiting. God beyond words. So mysterious, I’m reminded of systematic theologian Paul Tillich’s argument that God is not a *being*, but the *essence* or *Ground of Being*. Still, to pray, to talk with our Creator, we need some language; so, you and I might call God “Father” or “Mother” or Creator, or as Jesus called God in the Bible, “Papa” or “Daddy”.

How do you experience God?

In *Models of God*, Sallie McFague<sup>2</sup> explores metaphors for God. She suggested that how we experience God can come from our social reality – God is experienced uniquely by each of us. Perhaps most meaningful, especially in times of crisis and grief, is this image of a Shepherd God, and we the sheep.

I never gave a second thought as a child to being told that Jesus was my Shepherd, and I like a sheep, but the more independent-minded I became, the less I liked this metaphor. Sheep, mindlessly following a leader. Remember the wayward sheep in Jesus’ parable<sup>3</sup> who leaves the flock, and the shepherd has to scoop the lost sheep from the cliff? Is that sheep me? Between you and me sometimes I can relate to that lost sheep. Independent and strong as we feel, we are God’s beloved.

My image of God tends to be impacted by my life experience, my context. I’m reminded, though, that we do change by another story in John’s Gospel – Jesus talking by night with Nicodemus, Jesus telling Nicodemus that one must be “born from above” understand God’s vision. We must be continually open to new understandings of ourselves, and new ways of seeing God.

I bristle at first consideration of that image of Holy Shepherd and I the sheep, but then theologian Barbara Brown Taylor puts some fresh perspective to that metaphor. She

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3: 16-19, 23,24 see <https://bible.oremus.org/?ql=486549231>

<sup>2</sup> *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Sallie McFague. © 1987 Fortress Press.

<sup>3</sup> Lost Sheep parable, Matthew 18:12–14 see <https://bible.oremus.org/?ql=486549023>

tells of an acquaintance who had <sup>4</sup>actually grown up on a sheep ranch and could dispel the myth that sheep are dumb. The friend argues that it was actually the cattle ranchers who started that rumour. Sheep don't behave at all like cows – cows are herded from the rear by shouts and prods from the ranchers on horses. This strategy doesn't work for sheep. If you stand behind sheep making noises, they will just run around behind you. Sheep prefer to be led. Cows are pushed; sheep must be led. Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else – their trusted shepherd – does not go first, to show them that everything is all right. Sheep are, in fact, the smart ones. You go first, Shepherd! Brown Taylor adds that sheep seem to consider the shepherd as part of the family – there is a relationship, their own language.

As you and I grow spiritually, I think that our images of God may change as our life situations change. Yet, at the essence of our understanding of God, is this strange tension between holy mystery and intimacy.

---

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor Sermon “The Voice of the Shepherd” is offered in the “Pastoral Perspective” commentary by Nancy R. Blakely. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.