

A Case for Being Likened to Sheep

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

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A story is told about an person walking along the mountainside in the Alps with a friend who raised sheep.

Seeking new perspective on this metaphor of sheep and shepherd I found another story:

In the land collectively called Palestine in 1936, Arabs who had lived there for centuries were revolting against the colonial British Government.

During the riots, a village near Haifa was condemned to collective punishment by having its sheep and cattle confiscated by the British Government. Arabs, however, were permitted to reclaim their flocks - for a price.

There is a story about a shepherd boy whose six or eight sheep and goats were all he had, but they were confiscated by the government. Somehow, he found the money to buy them back, and went to the big enclosure where all the animals were penned, and gave the money to the British Officer in charge.

*The Officer laughed at that idea, but told the boy that he was welcome to the reclaim his animals. The Officer did not believe that the boy would pick out his "little flock" from among the hundreds, perhaps thousands in the pen. The little shepherd had no doubt, though, and immediately gave his call, it was his shepherd's pipe – called a *nai* ¹(rhymes with "high") – and "his own" flock soon separated themselves from the rest of the animals and followed him out of the pen. ²*

Let's set the record straight, here and now.

Sheep can be stereotyped. A 2005 Guardian article entitled "Sheep might be dumb... but they're not stupid" cites research that concludes: sheep, ridiculed for a non-questioning herd mentality, possess a sharp sense of individuality and can recognise the faces of at least 10 people and 50 other sheep for at least two years. Scientists ...also discovered that sheep react to facial expressions and, like humans, prefer a smile to a grimace.³

Nonetheless, sheep can get into some difficult spots. So can we, though!

I have known a few quite brilliant people who often seem oblivious to their context. They might have a PHD, but they, and sometimes we, need a little help to solve day-to-day problems. My quirk is that my perfect day is spent daydreaming, pondering the wonders of the universe. We have to make a living, right?

¹ For more facts about the *nai*, go to: <https://larkininthemorning.com/blogs/articles/the-ney-the-middle-eastern-flute>

² Eric F. F. Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine*. pp. 297-98. © 1955 London: Lutterworth.

³ "Sheep might be dumb ... but they're not stupid!" The Guardian: The Observer Sunday March 13 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/>

I bet you have a quirk, or two or three. Quirks that might make you more like that sheep than you would want to admit.

Today, I'm making the case, though, that the sheep are smarter than we give them credit for. And, if we are perfectly honest, we humanly creatures are probably not quite so smart as we think we are.

We depend on shepherds. Sometimes we find ourselves serving as a shepherd in someone or another. Other times, we look to leaders who inspire us when we are feeling skeptical about the world – leaders who challenge us when we are feeling a bit helpless. The world needs good Shepherds. My whole life I have cringed at the suggestion that I might be likened to that naïve, dependent, cute sheep. They just seem oblivious to the dangers lurking nearby. Could I need a shepherd, as those sheep do?

Let me ask a different question in search of perspective:

What is life like when we have bad leaders – bad shepherds – that have authority around us? What happens when an elected political leader seems to lack moral integrity and wisdom?

Surely a nation wouldn't elect a person who is self-serving and seems not to care about the cost of their actions to the most vulnerable citizens. Of course, that is just a hypothetical question.

Our world needs *Good* Shepherds.

Have you heard a leader speak who has the ability to inspire, to resonate with your core values? I have – not often, but I have. It reminds me that, like those sheep that recognize the voice of their shepherd, separating themselves from the masses to follow that voice, that song.

I would never have imagined myself making a case for the value of this image, of we being like sheep needing a Good Shepherd. But here I am. It is strange, how, when we see a self-serving shepherd who is oblivious to the dangers faced by their flock, we give thanks for the good shepherds. We feel a bit like sheep.

And we give thanks for our Spiritual Shepherd, a Creator, whom, through the lens of faith, we know holds Creation in loving balance. Amen.