

Let us pray: Open our eyes and hearts God of sacred story.
Speak to us through these words,
show us the way,
and give us strength to live in faith. Amen.

Forget all those paintings you've seen of a blue-eyed, blonde Jesus carrying a fluffy, white lamb in his arms. The reading from John is all about business.

A flock of Sheep without a shepherd will soon be gone-stolen, butchered, or taken by wild animals.

And with the flock gone the families who depend on it, now struggling, will soon be gone, too. And if the families go, society falls apart. Everything is at stake in this reading...literally, and spiritually.

Something this crucial can't be left to those who are not committed to this way of life, --a shepherd's life.

The good shepherd cares so much about the sheep that he is sacrificial in taking care of them. Verse 11 says "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

This is important because there are two different types of shepherds; There is the one who is a Hired Hand, and the one who Owns the sheep.

The hired hand is doing this shepherding gig as a part-time job to earn money for him/her self. There is definitely some self-interest going on here and he doesn't really care all that much for the sheep. At some point, something really tough will happen and the hired hand will say, "I'm outta here."
"I didn't sign up for this."

But the good shepherd, (lower case 'g' and lower case 's')
the one who Owns the sheep, has no limitations to his level of care for his
sheep. The scripture says that the Good Shepherd will lay down his life,
of his own accord, of his own volition, to save and protect his sheep. He is
willing and prepared to die in order to protect his sheep if it comes to that.
He has a vested interest....(financial?....probably)

-So what does this say about Jesus? Was he the hired hand? Or the owner?

Jesus' life and destiny are criss-crossed with his Disciples.
Jesus is linked to them, as he is with God, and God with him; a total commitment.

The 'Shepherd and the Sheep' metaphor is a lesson in leadership
for the disciples, the com-munity of Johns' gospel, and us.

The com-munity is much wider and more universal than we know.

Jesus says this to the disciples when he says,

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold."

Vs.16

The Pharisees believed only specific Jews were the 'chosen ones,'
but Jesus will go beyond the majority to the minority groups and call
each person by name, to the ones who are "not of my flock," and call
each one to be saved.

Importantly he says, "I know my own and my own know me."

(A reference to something the Gentiles might have known;

"One sheep, One flock" led by one Lord.)

And the early 'sheep' learned that worship didn't have to be centered
in one place. They came to value 'tent over temple,' and sheep over settled land.
To be a shepherd eventually became a noble occupation throughout Jewish history.

The Hebrew community was more than a "chosen people",

Taber-Hamilton says they were a "partner people" -

-people who valued equality and mutual respect.

-they elected leaders from their own community.

So, from the beginning, these former slaves, surrounded in the promised land
by nations who were ruled by the elite royalty,
(who oppressed the poor and weak), these nomads, saw themselves as one people;
living in an equal partnership with each other, and with Yahweh.

But by the time of Jesus' birth things had changed. There was now a new royal governance, new temple-worship under King Solomon and social divisions began to appear.

A people who "All Were One"- a people in Partnership with God, was no longer true.

The Gospel of John tells a similar shepherd story, but this time it's about a "Good Shepherd." (who is Not the owner)

In John's time, as in Jesus' time, shepherds were the dispossessed, the lowest rung of the social ladder. They didn't own their own land, they were often herding someone else's sheep, they ended up as the hired-hands of wealthy Roman landlords.

Yet, Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd."
He uses this outward identity to challenge us about our preconceptions, conditioned, familiar ideas of a shepherd.

Taber-Hamilton explains the invitation for those who are hearing the story for the first time that day in Jerusalem, (and for us), is to think about what is really important in human relationships, as well as our Jesus/and us relationship.

Jesus' explanation is always the same; com-passion, moral character, and generous inclusive action

We're not to condemn others by dividing them into various groups; we need to look into the eyes of those we despise, hate, reject, condemn those we are tempted to scape-goat. Instead, we should embrace them as children of God, as equal partners.

Like Jesus, we're to live with those who are rejected by society; the tax collectors, sinners, Samaritans, shepherds, and us. Even those who keep silent.

Maybe we need to re-embrace the chosen people's idea of "com-munity."
Our community where we decide who's in, and who's out?

(a very controversial belief today)

Or God's community?

We remember, as we live in this Easter Season, that we believe resurrection can, and does, happen in our lives, in our communities and in the world. And if we understand what Jesus really meant when he said,
 “I am the Good Shepherd, I have you,
 and I have other sheep that don’t belong to my fold,”
we will know that resurrection is true.....for everyone.

Let us pray: God, you are the great Carer of the World.
In your presence we can live lives of love and truth
knowing that in Jesus you lived right here with us,
and in the Spirit, you live in us.
Help us be your sheep.
Amen.