

John 10: 11-18

1 John 3: 16-24

May 3, 2009

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A few weeks ago, we were in one of the pet stores in Picton, the one in the Sobeys Plaza. Upon entering the store we heard a sound, not the usual bark or meow or chirp you usually hear in a pet store, this was a “baaa” kind of sound. We stopped and said, “Is there a sheep in here?” To our surprise the answer was Yes! A lamb wearing a baby diaper was in the store! Only two weeks old, it had been left behind by a sick mother who had died. The father was not interested and of course could not care for it in the way it needed to be cared for and so the owner, the shepherd, had become the surrogate mother, bottle feeding it, loving it, protecting it. His name, she told us, was Lambert.

The next week I took a trip to the pet store, hoping to see Lambert again, but alas someone had reported to their head office that there was a lamb in the store and they quickly banned him from the store. How unfortunate for those of us lamb-lovers who hoped to see him again.

I love sheep, particularly, lambs. I love everything about them, their spindly legs and plump bodies, their little heads and pointy faces. Now I have to admit all of my dealings with sheep have been from a distance. I have never “lived” with sheep; fed them, sheared them, smelt them 24/7; kept them as my livelihood and took them to the butcher. My opinion might be different if this were the case.

But for me sheep represent something else something Biblically based. I love the image of the “Good Shepherd”. I love the pictures of Jesus holding the sheep, standing among the sheep. He always looks so gentle, and kind, and loving in those pictures. What a beautiful image, Jesus holding an innocent lamb with such love.

I wanted to hold Lambert that way; I wish I could have picked Lambert up and hugged him and cuddled him. I did pet him, and look him in the eye and compliment him on his cuteness!

Today’s reading, shows Jesus as that loving, gentle, kind shepherd. Can’t you just put yourself in the lamb’s place? Held by Jesus, snuggled up in the lap of the shepherd, loved, protected. What a beautiful image but the image from the picture in our minds is not necessarily the whole story of the shepherd and as we delve into our scripture we learn so much more about this unusual and yet familiar shepherd.

There was a time when shepherding was an honourable thing to do, however that was in King David’s time long before Jesus. By the time Jesus was alive shepherding had changed. Shepherds were no longer held in high esteem and the people of Jesus time would wonder why Jesus would compare himself to such a lowly state. You see, by Jesus time pastureland was now privately owned, previously it had been open land that

could be wandered freely. Now, local farmers did not appreciate shepherds running their flocks through their designated lands, trampling their crops. In addition, to call oneself a “Good Shepherd” would be like saying you were a “good Samaritan” when everyone knew there was no such thing as a “good” Samaritan, Samaritans were not good, they were the low-life people, dirty, smelly, untrustworthy. Once again, scripture indicating the biases of the times and Jesus’ alignment with the outcasts of society.

In chapter 10 verses 11-18 this week’s focus is on the shepherd who would lay down his life for the sheep compared to the hired hand who would run at the first sign of danger. Now some of you may know the difference immediately between the hired hand and the shepherd. Some of you may have even worked with hired hands before. Now, let me be clear, there are some good hired hands out there, who are devoted to the farmer or rancher that they are working for however Jesus is trying to make a distinction and here it is: when you are the owner you have a greater investment in the health and well being of the sheep.

The hired hand is more likely to flee in the face of danger; they see the wolf coming and high tail it to safety. These folks are ruled not by love but by fear. The love of the sheep is not present and foremost, the hired hand is concerned only for themselves and their personal safety. The shepherd, on the other hand, is prepared to lay down his life for the sheep, and not just his sheep but sheep from other folds as well, all sheep, everyone’s sheep. Jesus will be there for any sheep in fact hoping to unite all sheep as one.

The gospel of John wants so badly for the reader to hear this message of the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep that he states it not once but five times in this section that the shepherd will lay down his life. Five times! Verse 11, 15, 17 and twice in 18. Then he adds this, not only will he die but he will die of his own free will. The book of John wants us to understand that Jesus died because he wanted to, he allowed it; Good Friday would not have happened if he and God had not allowed it; and not only that but Jesus had the power to take it up again. Easter! Jesus was always in control of the situation according to the book of John. In fact, there is no betrayal kiss by Judas in the book of John. Judas comes with the soldiers to the garden where Jesus and the disciples are but he does not kiss Jesus instead Jesus controls the situation by asking, “who are you looking for?”

John 10: 17-18 says this “For this reason God loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.”

Now I want to jump to 1 John 3: 16-17, the writer of this letter is talking to the community of early Christians, he says, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” The shepherd never leaves the sheep. The shepherd does whatever needs to be done to take care of the sheep.

I wanted to use a hymn today but it would have meant 2 new ones and I didn't want to do that to you but listen to these words written by Jaroslav Vajda number 360 in VU,

“A shepherd and a sheep – the sheep is lost! Far from the flock, the one in hundred cries, then, risking life, the shepherd's voice and staff! Am I that treasured sheep worth dying for? I live, and you rejoice! What love! What love!

Dear God, you sought us when the world was lost, you gave your only son at what a cost, your spirit welcomes home the tempest tossed: now we can be all you were dreaming of. We're safe, and you rejoice! What love! What love!”

1 John 3: 18 goes on, “let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Not in word or speech but in truth and action. Take action, do something good, be the shepherd, do what it takes to keep the sheep in check. Take care of the flock, bring them in, guide them, direct them, keep them safe from danger. Make sure they are fed and watered.

Abide in him and obey his commandment that we should believe in the name of Jesus and love one another. If we do this than we cannot leave anyone behind; we cannot see need in our world and not respond in some way.

As we look to our shepherd we have seen the truth and action. Jesus laid down his life for the sheep and took it up again. He is asking us to do the same through our actions and the way we live our lives; he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. We have been given the free will to take on the challenge and follow the shepherd. We're safe and you rejoice What love! What love!

Amen