

Reimagining the Flock
John 10:11–18
Sunday, April 25, 2021 (Easter 4)

So we are still in the season of Easter, but instead of hearing a resurrection story today, the lectionary has us going back to *before* Jesus' death and resurrection. It's almost like saying, "Okay, Christ is risen. Now we need to go back and look at some of these things that he said and taught *before* all of this and try to make sense out of what has happened." It's like in a movie or a TV show or a book, when they flash back to something that happened in the past that gives us a better understanding of what's happening *now*. And the fourth Sunday of Easter is referred to as "Good Shepherd Sunday," because every year it focuses on Psalm 23 and chapter 10 of John's gospel, where Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd. So there is something about this idea of the Good Shepherd that helps us understand who the resurrected Christ is and how we are called to follow him.

Jesus starts off here by saying, "I am the good shepherd." And right away, there is something in us that is like, "Oh, I've heard *that* before! I know *that* imagery! That's like back in the 23rd Psalm, where it says, 'The Lord is my shepherd.'" Jesus is working with imagery that we already know, maybe one of the most familiar and beloved and comforting pieces of scripture for many people. So right off the bat, we've got the warm fuzzies here. We're feeling good about what Jesus is saying and where this is going.

But there's a *problem* when you're working with source material that people are already familiar with (like the 23rd Psalm). And to help us understand this, I want us to think about it in terms of *movies*. You make a movie that everyone *loves*; it's a huge hit. And you want to follow up on that success. There are a couple of ways of doing that.

You can make a *sequel*. A sequel is taking that original movie and continuing the same story with the same characters. You have the original movie like *Rocky* or *Star Wars*, and then you make a part two to show what happens next. We all get the idea of a sequel.

Instead of a sequel, though, you could do a *remake*. A remake is when you take that original story, with the same characters, and you just make a new version of that exact same movie. It's like *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The book was written in 1844. Then in 1908, they turned it into a silent film. They made the same movie again in 1913 and 1922 and 1934 and 1942 and 1953 and 1954, and then it took a little while but they made a really good version of it in 2002. But it's the exact same story. They just update it from time to time, remake it with new actors.

Or, instead of a sequel or a remake, one of the things that we're seeing a lot of right now is what's called a *reboot*. A reboot takes an existing series of stories and characters and starts it over again, ignoring the movies that came before it. They do this a lot with superhero movies like Batman and Spiderman. Back in the early 2000s, they released *Spiderman 1*, *Spiderman 2*, and *Spiderman 3*; sequels that had the same actors, same characters, and furthered the same story. Then in 2012 they made a *new* Spiderman movie that ignored those previous three movies and started the story over with new actors and a new storyline. They did it *again* in 2017 when they threw out *that* reboot and started over *again* with new actors and a new storyline. Reboots can get very confusing when you're trying to figure out which movies belong with which series.

Or, instead of doing a reboot, you can do a *reimagining*. A reimagining takes an existing story and characters and just puts a new spin on it. It tells a story that we are familiar with in a slightly different way. Like, "What if we took *this* story and did *this* with it?" In 1984, the movie *The Karate Kid* told the story of a teenage boy who moves to California with his mom and gets

bullied, so he learns karate from the Okinawan handyman, Mr. Miyagi. In 2010, they made *another* movie called *The Karate Kid*, which tells the story of Dre, a 12-year-old boy who moves to China with his mother and gets bullied, so he learns kung fu from the Chinese handyman, Mr. Han. Same basic idea, and it even includes some quotes from the original movie, but there are new characters in a new setting with some other differences. It would be like saying, “What if we took *The Count of Monte Cristo* and set it in 2021.” It’s a *reimagining* of that original story.

Now, the problem that you run into any time you make a sequel or a remake or a reboot or a reimagining is that it can be *very polarizing*. People love the original *so much* that there’s almost a feeling like, “Just leave it alone! It’s perfect the way it is. You don’t need to make another one. Don’t change this thing that we love, because you might mess it up.” It is very, very rare that a sequel or remake or reboot or reimagining is as beloved as the original.

And that is certainly the case here with Jesus! Jesus is using this imagery from the 23rd Psalm, and at first it sounds good, but then he makes some *changes* to it, and people start to get upset. In verse 19, the very next thing that happens after the part that we read today, it says, “The Jews were *divided* because of these words.” His words are literally divisive. Then in verse 31, “The Jews took up stones again to stone him.” And in verse 39, they try to arrest him. What Jesus says here is *so upsetting* to them that they want to arrest him and kill him! Why? What is Jesus doing here that is so upsetting?

He’s not just making a *sequel* to the 23rd Psalm, like, “Here’s what happens *next* with the Lord who is my shepherd.” He’s not just doing a *remake* where he’s telling the exact same 23rd Psalm all over again. He’s not doing a *reboot* where he throws out the 23rd Psalm and starts telling the story of the Lord who is my shepherd all over again. Jesus is *reimagining* the 23rd Psalm. He is

taking that original imagery and setting it in modern times, putting it in a new context with a new spin on it. And it is precisely that new context and spin that is so upsetting to his audience.

We have to remember who Jesus' audience *is* here. He is talking to the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders who were considered the holiest of the holy, the most faithful of the faithful. They would have known this shepherd imagery backwards and forwards. And the first thing Jesus says to them here is, "*I am* the good shepherd." "But wait, wait, wait. The *Lord* is my shepherd. And you're saying that *you* are the shepherd? You are the *Lord*?" That's problematic for them. It borders on *blasphemy*.

But then he takes it a step further and talks about how the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep which, reading this *after* his death, we know that Jesus *does*. He lays down his life for sinful humanity. But then he says, "The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away...because he does not care for the sheep." He is comparing the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders, to hired hands who do not really care about the people. It would be like if someone said to *me*, "You're just a hired hand. You don't really care about these people. You're just drawing a paycheck." It would be really insulting, and it was really insulting to *them*. They're like, "*That* wasn't in the 23rd Psalm!"

Then Jesus takes it a step *further* and says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." If the Lord, the God of Israel, is the shepherd, then the *people* of Israel are the sheep, the flock. God's promise, the promise of the 23rd Psalm, was for the people of Israel. But what Jesus is saying here is that God has *other* sheep, other *people*, that do not belong to the flock of

Israel. That Gentiles, non-Jewish people are included in the promise of God's shepherding love and care. That *they* will listen to his voice and be brought in to the Kingdom of God. This would have been deeply insulting to the Pharisees and to the people of Israel, who were God's chosen people. Jesus is saying, "This story is not just for you. We're going to reimagine it and expand the audience." And one of the things *we* have to do is reimagine this story and this imagery for *our* times.

We love the 23rd Psalm. It's comforting to us. We love the idea of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who cares for us. But what Jesus is doing here – with his original audience and with *us* – is showing us that the Lord is not just *my* shepherd, and the Lord is not just *our* shepherd. The Lord is the Good Shepherd who has *other* sheep that do not belong to our fold.

It is a natural human tendency to divide and categorize in such a way that we end up thinking the blessing and love and salvation of God is only for *us*, for *our* group, for those who *look* like us and *think* like us and *believe* like us and *practice their faith* like us, who belong to *this* church or *this* denomination or *this* faith tradition or *this* political affiliation. But the *source* of our salvation is not our beliefs or traditions or practices or politics. It is the Good Shepherd. And the shepherding love of God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for *the world*, for *all* of humanity, not just those who were already a part of the flock. Jesus says here that there is no "us and them," "in and out." There is *one flock* and *one shepherd*. And the Good Shepherd cares for *all* of his sheep, even the ones that we don't know about.

Our calling in this is not to try to figure out who is a part of the flock; *who* are the "other sheep" that belong to God? Our calling is to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd and have our eyes opened to the possibility that this other person is also a part of the fold. This other person who

does not *look* like me or *think* like me or *act* like me or *sound* like me or *believe* like me or *practice their faith* like me, this person who does not share the same political beliefs that I do – the shepherding, sacrificial love of God is for *them*, too. This other person who might frustrate you and infuriate you, and everything about them runs counter to everything about you – *they* belong to God, too.

It makes me think of Jen’s aunt, who is running for a City Council position out around Pittsburgh. She has been calling voters in the area to ask for support, and she has called quite a few people who, the first question they ask her is, “Are you a Christian?” And she’s *not*. She is a good, kind, compassionate, caring, thoughtful, loving person who patiently listens to *all* people, especially the ones she disagrees with. And she says to them, “I try to live my life by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule and the morals of the Bible,” but for some people that’s just not enough. Is this what Jesus calls us to, to say, “I can only vote for you or support you or be down with you if you believe the same things I do.” Or is Jesus saying to us, “I have other sheep that aren’t a part of your group, but they listen to my voice, and they belong to me, and they’re coming along with us.”

Theologian Gennifer Brooks writes that “the divisiveness that plagues both society and the church is contrary to the divine call...[B]eing part of that one fold that belongs to the good shepherd means loving neighbors in all their diversity.”¹ And so the question for *us* is, “Who are the *other sheep* in my life?” Who are those that I look at and think, “This person is so different from me, so *other* than me, that they aren’t a part of my group?” Can you love them? Can you see them as Christ’s sheep, too? Because they *are*. We just need to reimagine the flock and welcome them into the fold. Or maybe *they* can welcome *us*...

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-1011-18-5>