

## Sheep Hunting

Read: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

There is a pretty sizable herd of deer in my neighborhood in Cherry Hill. I don't remember seeing them when I first moved there 23 years ago, so I was surprised when they began to show up. These deer live in a world that their relatives in rural areas can only dream about. These suburban animals don't have to worry today that deer season has opened. Their biggest threat comes from being struck down by velocity addicts in their Lexuses and their Beamers who can't put their smart phones down long enough to drive to Wawa and back.

If you live in the country, you will routinely spot deer all over the place until the shooting starts. Typically, deer season opens on the Saturday after Thanksgiving when hunters take to the woods, rifles in arm in search of venison. Then deer become as scarce as hens' teeth. Now, in addition to the herd of deer, my neighborhood is overrun by flocks of aggressive wild turkeys who chase everyone from the mailman to the garbage men, but that's a story for another sermon.

Today I want to talk about sheep hunting, just pasture variety sheep you might find on a small farm, not the elusive bighorn sheep you might hear scabbling over the cliff sides in the Rocky Mountains, just the not-too-bright, high-maintenance kind that require good fences else they will wander off and get lost before you and they know it.

The fish and game commission has not set a certain time when sheep are in season. I guess you could say sheep are always in season. Sheep are always in danger from predators of one sort or another. As animals go they are pretty defenseless. Plus they are headstrong and get into plenty of trouble even without enemies to harm them. Sheep easily wander off and get lost. I think the behavior of sheep inspired the folk saying, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." Is it any wonder that the Bible often refers to God's people as sheep and to God as a shepherd?

I don't know if you know this, but God is quite a sheep hunter. God is searching for you and for me. We often make much of our search for God but the truth is, long before we come to see ourselves as seekers, God is hard at work seeking the love and devotion of our hearts. In the end, we love because God first loved us. That's the order of things according to God's word.

In our passage from Ezekiel we are given a list of verbs that describe what the sheep hunter, our searching God, has in mind for us when God finds us. Here's the list: rescuing, gathering, feeding, healing, and nurturing. God promises to become our shepherd and in the process the world will begin to experience public justice as it was ever and always intended by God. Let's look at each verb in turn to see if we can come to appreciate what life with our God is supposed to be like.

**First:** Rescuing. If you've ever found yourself far from your home in God, my guess, based upon some of my own painful experiences as a prodigal son, is that you know what it's like to be tangled in some thicket or other. Like sheep without a shepherd, we soon find ourselves in trouble, facing problems we have not the slightest clue how to solve. We become so disoriented we can't find our way home. The thicket might be an addiction. It might be a besetting sin that you can't seem to shake free from; the harder you try, the more you repent, you still keep returning for one more drink of muddy water. It might be that your heart has been so wounded that you cannot sustain meaningful, in depth relationships. You may become estranged from family, from friends, from your church, or simply live alienated from the world. You may become adrift, without a supportive community, ensnared in a painful loneliness from which there seems to be no escape.

Whatever, when we attempt to live apart from God, our creator and redeemer, our source of life and love, we must be brought to the awareness of helplessness. None of us like to go there. We all like to feel in charge, to feel confident of our ability to cope with life. As long as we hold to our illusions of self-sufficiency, we will never allow ourselves to be rescued. But rescue is the first step in what we really need. The sheep hunter does not come armed with

gun in hand to take our life away. God comes to us in the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, so that we might finally have life and have it abundantly.

**Second: Gathering.** God rescues us in order to make us a part of something bigger than ourselves. Everyone from theologians to the most advanced scientists has come to know that reality is at its core, deeply relational. Even our very notion of God is relational. We have come to know God as The Holy Trinity, which is a terse way to say that the divine is best understood and known by us as a cosmic, creative dance of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each member of the godhead constantly giving and receiving love among themselves and giving and receiving love to and from their own magnificent creation.

We are gathered into the Body of Christ. We never truly become ourselves apart from relationships of love and service. We are sooner or later taught to trade in our paltry self-reliance for reliance upon God. When we are weak, we are strong. The more uniquely we discover our worth as individuals, we become more and more free to give ourselves away in love. We no longer crave validation from others. We find ourselves walking the path that leads us to be men and women, fully alive, to the glory of God. We are gathered not just for our own good but for the good of each other.

**Third: Feeding.** If you spend all your time in the world eating junk food for your spirit, you will come home hungry. It was hunger that finally got the prodigal son's attention. He began to crave some good home cooking. He had come to discover that what the world promised it did not deliver. People only pretended to be his friend as long as he was buying rounds at the local pub. Sexy women told him he was The Man until the money ran out. He went from eating prime rib to competing for husks fit only for pigs to eat.

Sooner or later, the world will let you starve for the things you really need. The Good Shepherd promises us good pasture. And unlike the world, Jesus delivers. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; the one who comes to me will never be hungry again."

Our most basic hunger, the hunger that identifies us as being truly human, is our need to love and to be loved. The sheep hunter feeds us first on the love of God. Our hunger takes other forms as well. We have a hunger for a clear conscience. God feeds us with mercy and forgiveness. We have a hunger to not be alone. Jesus promises to never leave us or forsake us. We have a hunger for all of our inner turmoil, our fears, our worries, and our anxieties to be still. Jesus commands the wind and waves of our stormy seas: "Peace, be still," and powerful forces arrayed against us calm down. We are given the peace that passes understanding.

**Fourth: Healing.** When the sheep hunter finally gets to us, many of us are weak and injured. I have a little saying which helps me deal with troubled and sometimes troublesome human beings: "It's all about the wounds." We are all wounded in so many different ways. Some of us are wounded by rejection and embark on a futile search for acceptance in all the wrong places. Some of us are wounded by abandonment, coming to think of ourselves as "throw away people," people who are not worth the effort. Some of us endure abuse that tells our deep hearts that we are getting what we deserve because we are too worthless to deserve to be treated well and to be respected. Many of us become complicit in wounding one another. We label each other, categorize each other, judge each other, and condemn each other.

When I am wounded, I am prone to be irritable, resentful, willful, angry, impatient, and downright annoying. The Good Shepherd promises to bind up my wounds and yours. The more we are healed, the better able we are to live joyfully as members of the Body of Christ. Your healing and mine is an indispensable part of our walk as disciples. If you think you don't need healing, have another thought. We all are wounded, weak, and injured. The sheep hunter says, "I am the Lord that healeth thee."

**Fifth: Nurturing.** When we finally are brought home from our experiences of being lost, trapped, scattered, hungry, and broken, in addition to being sought, set free, brought home to the family, fed a nourishing diet at last, and having our wounds touched deeply by our shepherd who is the Great Physician, we need a

season of nurturing. Our restoration usually takes time. We need tender loving care from the one both qualified and authorized to give it, who is Jesus the Christ.

So after all this, is there anything else? Are we done yet or is there more? Yes, there is one final thing. It is very important and we dare not miss it. We dare not quit too soon. Here it is: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." Ezekiel 34:16

Did you hear it? Amidst all the mercy and kindness there is also the promise of justice. Wanton disregard for the poor and the needy will not be the hallmark of God's dealing with human beings. Justice is part of the package. There can be no real healing without justice.

Jesus put it this way: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory." He goes on to describe the gathering of all nations before him for judgment and the separation of sheep from goats. The sheep who have received the ministry that we just described in detail as it was presented in Ezekiel 34 are expected to and in fact do reproduce the quality of care that they have received and practice it in the world. In this there is great reward and eternal joy.

The goats are the ones who received the same kindness of God and yet refused to reflect it in the world. They are ticketed for punishment. This is a sober warning to each one of us. The sheep hunter blesses us into a much larger purpose. We are called to represent the character of Christ in the world. We are called insofar as we are gifted and able to continue to do works like those of Jesus among the poor and needy of this world. To refuse to participate is perhaps the ultimate unfaithfulness.

So, my advice to you is, "Don't be a goat." The sheep hunter is hunting for sheep who have more to offer than just being a dumb animal who doesn't know what to do or where to go. To be one of Jesus' flock means you finally have enough sense to let him lead you no matter where he chooses to take you. After

all, Jesus Christ is King. And as our King he deserves, and yes demands, our loyal obedience.