

Hesychia & Sheepdogs of the Soul

A sermon on Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

I remember as a young child in Sunday School singing about
just wanting to be a sheep
- after all pharisees aren't fair you see,
Sadducees are so sad you see,
and hypocrites just aren't hip with it.
I just want to be a sheep.



Yet in our culture, being called a sheep usually isn't a good thing.

But I don't think that song is really about striving to be gullible and mindless "sheeple."

It's interesting that in a lot of the early Christian writings I'm so fond of, a common phrase for Christians is "the **rational flock**" or "the logical flock"

maybe those writers were just stressing Christianity's intellectual respectability,

-but I'm going to go ahead and say our stupidity

isn't the main reason that sheep metaphors get used so often in our scriptures.

(though people sure can be stupid sometimes)



We might be insulted to be compared to the humble, and stupid, sheep

- but we'd be missing the point.

Because it isn't about us ... it's about God

and the models of what Godly leadership looks like.

It is the shepherds that get the honor of being the exemplar
of the type of leaders God wants for his people.

We see shepherd language being used to describe God in the **23rd Psalm**

- one who can be trusted to guide his people through green pastures with still waters,
and provides for them in the midst of their enemies.

The author of that Psalm, **King David** himself, had been a shepherd.

Even way back with **Cain and Abel**,

God had given preference to the shepherd

- though that episode was about more than choice of profession.



Hesychia & Sheepdogs of the Soul



The Prophet Jeremiah's words tell us what a fearful thing it is to be a shepherd of God's rational flock.

It turns out that good Godly shepherds don't scatter their sheep.

Jeremiah speaks of woe, of destruction, against these shepherds that didn't get that memo.

The story doesn't end there however.

The point isn't to punish the wicked, but tend to the sheep.

Through Jeremiah, God promises that he will gather the scattered sheep to his pasture and will raise up faithful shepherds to tend them.

He speaks of one in particular, the Righteous branch of David the shepherd-king.

This story of scattered sheep seeking a shepherd is one that works on multiple levels.

The ultimate fulfillment of this prophesy, is Jesus Christ,

who on the cosmic level defeats spirits of division and corruption, of sin and death.

We'll come back to that.

Mark ties that grand cosmic level to the level of the tangible.

In the Gospel reading this morning, we get some of this Christ as shepherd imagery.

There's also the recognition of that same truth that Jeremiah saw,

that God's people aren't being adequately shepherded.

And Christ has compassion on them, and teaches them.

(he feeds them too - the bit that got skipped over is Mark's version of the Feeding of the 5000).

We can take this sheep business beyond it's initial contexts

- it probably has some implications for today's world.

You can think about this in the context of the church, or more broadly, it still applies.

It's not good for the sheep to be scattered, for people to be divided, alienated, directionless

and according to Jeremiah - also not great for those doing the scattering,

but there is again that comfort that God will raise up good shepherds,

and that Christ has compassion for un-shepherded sheep.

In the Gospel reading - those people whom he has compassion for...

it might be worth saying thing or two about these sheep without a shepherd.

As Jesus says elsewhere in the gospels, his sheep know him, know his voice.

And here, it is not just those who **saw** Jesus and the disciples get into the boat,

but those who **recognized** him. The Greek there is a little stronger **ἐπιγινώσκω** "to know."

But not only did they **see** and **know**, they **sought** him out.

They went running on ahead.

Hesychia & Sheepdogs of the Soul



In a commentary from the Venerable Bede,
an 8th century English churchman/historian:

[Jesus] tries the faith of the multitude, and by seeking a desert place He would see whether they care to follow Him. And they follow Him, and not on horseback, nor in carriages, but laboriously coming on foot, they show how great is their anxiety for their salvation.

Now, Bede very helpfully ties together the ideas that:

A. These are sheep **looking** for their shepherd, and

B. That their shepherd is met in **wilderness** places,

in lonely places, such a place as Jesus is urging his disciples to rest in after their experiences teaching and casting out demons.

This brought to my mind yet another level at which this story arc occurs.

And it is perhaps the most personal and yet profound.

I'm talking about the level of the individual human soul.

Have you ever thought about what shepherds are directing your soul, your mind, your heart?

Thinking back to Jeremiah,

there are definitely things that leave me feeling scattered, unfocussed, anxious.

Much of the media and internet actually try to do this...quite effectively too.

Maybe it is a good reminder that such things aren't eternal, they don't last forever.

And even better to realize that there are better inner shepherds.

There is Christ after all.

The language of being scattered calls to mind how many Christian saints

have talked about the importance of countering a scattered nous

- nous is usually translated as mind but more in the sense of intuitive sensing than intellect.

Saint Isaac the Syrian begins one of his prayers:

*Make me worthy, O Lord, to know and love Thee,
not with knowledge from the exercise of a scattered nous,
but make me worthy of that knowledge whereby beholding Thee,
the nous glorifies Thy nature in divine vision.*

Isaac is asking there to see beyond his scattered-ness.

There's a tale from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers

about three devout men who wanted to serve God in their lives.

Hesychia & Sheepdogs of the Soul

One went to serve as a sort of mediator, a peacemaker resolving conflicts.
Another went to serve the sick.
The third went into the desert for solitude.
After a while, the first two became weary and their spirits were failing,
so they went to visit the third.



The monk listens silently,
then takes a water jar and stirs up the water with some dirt.
The water is of course murky.

After it had sat some time he tells his companions to look at the water again,
and the sediment had sunk leaving the water clear.

And he said it is the same way with one's soul;
it isn't clear for converse with God when constantly troubled.
But when allowed to settle, clarity would return.

The point of the story is not at all we should all go out into the desert
or give up on service to the sick or peacemaking.
The point is that taking some time for stillness is important.
It's needed in order to keep going.
Christ has even the Apostles go to a deserted place for rest.
Makes you think stillness might be worthwhile.



The Greek for stillness is hesychia (hezza-kee-a) - that first word in the title of this sermon.
This hesychia turns into a technical term for not just refraining from flailing about wildly,
but rather the inner stillness - that antithesis of anxiety -
that comes from quieting the mind, detaching from thoughts,
and simply being in the presence of God.
A whole system of spirituality eventually develops called hesychasm.
Most famously it involves training the inner disposition through the repetition of a short prayer
- Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me -
to the point that the prayer becomes the default thought of the mind
with the mind habitually returning to prayer.

When I first started learning about it, over a decade ago now - it was my first year away at college -
I had assumed hesychasm was some Buddhist thing,
but pretty much appropriated wholesale whatever it is that I understood of it.
Which was really rather little.
I'm still in no position to explain the finer points of hesychasm,
nor would that be particularly helpful for you.

Hesychia & Sheepdogs of the Soul

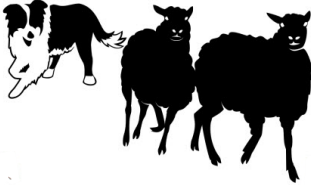
But in thinking about today's readings,
I thought it worth mentioning that inner stillness is worth cultivating.

I'll give you one more bonus aspect of hesychasm that goes right along with the shepherding theme.
Nepsis.

Nepsis is usually translated as attentiveness or watchfulness.
I'd go for mindfulness to link it to more standard meditative lingo, but the thing is,
Nepsis goes well beyond mindfulness meditation.

This is a type of attentiveness to what is going on in your inner world.
It is a watching of the thoughts,
and discerning if they are worth giving further attention to or not.

I have a mental image of a border collie stalking the thoughts that come into my head,
breaking off any harmful, scattering thoughts from the herd
before they can be implanted in the heart,
guarding the stillness,
ever listening for the still small voice of God.



Actually my inner border collies gets distracted a lot,
but it is an image I aspire to.

Have you ever seen sheepdogs herding sheep?
I've only seen it in videos, but from what I've seen it's pretty amazing.
When properly trained, they just know what to do to get the sheep moving this way or that.

A while back I saw a video in which the shepherd, the dog's handler,
decided to see what his dog would do
if he didn't give the command to go fetch the sheep.

It was remarkable.
Nothing happened.
Well, not nothing.



The dog stared at its master and just waited with that intense yet patient focus.

In some ways it might be better to have that sheepdog attitude than pretend to be the shepherd,
and make sure that it is God's pastures we're aiming at.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*