

Other SHEep
John 10.11-16
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Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home.

Have you ever felt like this? I have. I know what it is to feel lost, disoriented, disconnected and a long way from home. Maybe you know too.

But I have become aware that I cannot, with any integrity, borrow this language to describe my own experience without acknowledging that it comes from the actual, literal experience of slaves in America.

Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his *Classic Slave Narratives*, relates a story by Harriet Jacobs, an escaped slave:

On one of those sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was bought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do.

So, I don't think I can use "motherless children" as a metaphor to describe my own existential experience without acknowledging the literal reality from which it comes. Because the system that benefits me created and creates motherless children. And it still does – motherless children at the hands of violence including that perpetrated by police; motherless children at the southern border; motherless children who are made so by the political and economic policy of our government.

No matter how much we may use it as a metaphor to describe our own lives, being "motherless" is language that comes directly out of a real literal experience.

The same can be said of the Bible's use of shepherd and sheep. It is a metaphor that comes out of a real life experience. Being a shepherd is a dangerous job with life and livelihood at stake, with very little social standing, and with all the messiness that goes with caring for animals outdoors.

In fact, I'm not sure how long this metaphor will be useful for us given how few of us have any contact with the real life experience of shepherds and sheep.

I think I startled folks one Christmas Eve when I suggested that the most we know about the life of shepherds these days happens in the first half hour of the movie *Brokeback Mountain*.

Nonetheless, you can't read the Bible without stumbling into shepherds and sheep. There's Psalm 23 after all. There's the promise in Matthew that the Human One "will shepherd my people Israel." There's the story in Mark where Jesus is moved with compassion when he sees the crowd because "they were like sheep without a shepherd." And there is the shepherd in Luke 15 who leaves his ninety-nine sheep to go find the one that is lost.

And then there is this famous passage in John 10.

John 10.11-16 (Inclusive Bible)

I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd would die for the sheep. The hired hand, who is neither a shepherd nor owner of the sheep, catches sight of the wolf coming and runs away, leaving the sheep to be scattered or snatched by the wolf. That's because the hired hand works only for pay and has no concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me, in the same way Abba God knows me and I know God – and for these sheep I will lay down my life. I have other sheep that don't belong to this fold – I must lead them too, and they will hear my voice. And then there will be one flock, one shepherd. Jesus uses this metaphor of a shepherd because he knows that in real life, it's a dangerous job. It might take your life, he says.

And I want to point out that there are two kinds of sheep in this passage. There are those who are in danger of being lost and there are "other sheep:" "I have other sheep that don't belong to this fold," he says.

The other sheep are not lost sheep. They are just other sheep who belong to another fold. Maybe they look a little different or sound different. Maybe their diet is different. Perhaps they organize their flock differently. But it doesn't matter because, when they hear that shepherd's voice, they do not harden their hearts.

What I want to suggest to you – and confess about myself – is that I am among the sheep who are in danger of being lost. And one of the ways I can get lost is to be preoccupied with those "other" sheep – about how different they are and how odd their fold is and how superior my own flock is. I can be judgmental and critical of them. And here's the thing: the more distance I put between me and those "other sheep," the more danger there is that I will get lost.

I have a friend, the Rev. Dr. Corey Fields who is senior pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Newark, Delaware. He wrote an article in a series of articles about the church in the pandemic and his was titled "Ring Them Bells."

His article caught my attention because I was remembering how many folks in our own neighborhood wrote cards and made calls and sent emails about how comforting it was to hear our bells ringing during this time. They felt less alone and more connected. And every evening at 8 o'clock we would peel the bells in honor of first responders and our neighbors would join us with pots and pans and horns and shouts of "thank you." It was amazing in ways I can't completely describe.

But it turns out, I was wrong. Being cooler than I, Dr. Fields was writing about the lyrics of a Bob Dylan song: “Ring Them Bells.” He points out that there are a lot of biblical images in the song that have a prophetic edge: about “the world on its side” and “time running backward,” about the “poor man’s son” and the child that cries “when innocence dies.”

But these are the lines that stuck out at me:
Ring them bells so the world will know that our God is one
For the shepherd is asleep where the willows weep
And the mountains are filled with lost sheep.

Intended or not, here are echoes of John 10.

And it makes me realize that I get lost sometimes because I am too preoccupied with those other sheep and I lose track of the God who is one and is always closing the distance between us.

Sometimes I get lost because I have followed shepherds who are asleep and have left me sleep-walking through the world. Or worse, I have been that shepherd and I need to wake up to the dangers and the blessings of the world.

Dr. Fields ends his article, saying:

I know that for many pastors and church leaders, it has been draining just to figure out some of the basics in the midst of this pandemic. This doesn’t have to be a whole new challenge; I think we can view this simply. Show up. Hear people and amplify their voices. Offer encouragement, hope, and prayer. When struggle is deep, when “the world’s on its side and time is running backwards,” it can be surprisingly simple to offer a reminder of the grace and presence of God.

He’s right. I can be a lost sheep by just not showing up. I can get lost by being so preoccupied with my own voice that I cannot hear and amplify the voices of others. I can be lost in my own struggle and forget that others are struggling too and just need some promise of grace and the presence of that love from which we can never be separated.

But I have discovered that the easiest way to be lost is simply to refuse to be found.

One of my favorite Robert Fulghum stories is about children playing hide-and-seek. It was early October and ...

As I write this, he says, ... there is a kid under a pile of leaves in the yard just under my window. He has been there for a long time now, and everybody else is found and they are about to give up on him ... I considered going out ... and telling them where he is hiding. And I thought about setting the leaves on fire. Finally, I just yelled, “GET FOUND, KID!” out the window. And scared him so bad he probably wet his pants and started crying and ran home to tell his mother ... I like the game called Sardines. In Sardines the person who is It goes and hides and everyone goes looking ... When you find him, you get in and hide with him. Pretty soon everybody is hiding

together, all stacked in a small space like puppies in a pile. And pretty soon somebody giggles and somebody laughs and everybody gets found ... I think old God is a Sardine player. And will be found the same way everybody gets found in Sardines – by the sound of laughter of those heaped together at the end ... And so I say. To all those who have hid too good. Get found, kid!

Hide-and-seek and Sardines and shepherd and sheep and motherless children may all be borrowed metaphors for our own lives. But they are the language of real, literal experience.

And I can tell you that it is so easy to get lost. Just get preoccupied with those “other sheep.” Or just stop showing up. Or just follow the sound of your own voice rather than listening for and amplifying the voices of others. Or simply refuse to get found.

“There will be one flock and one shepherd,” Jesus says. And that shepherd cries out: “Get found, kid!”

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES:

Debra Lew Harder, “The Story Behind the African-American Spiritual that Evokes the Cry of the ‘Motherless Child,’” January 15, 2019. www.wti.org. The Rev. Dr. Corey Fields, “Ring Them Bells:” The Church as the megaphone of hurt and hope, *The Christian Citizen*, vol. 1, 2021, pp.8-9. Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (Ivy Books, 1986), pp.54-56.