

My children are struggling to be their children's teacher as well as parent. My daughter, Karen was reading a story to her six year old son and asking him the comprehension questions the teacher had sent. One of them required him to infer something about friendship in the story. Four year old Maddyn was listening in and had no trouble answering the question but Cole didn't get it. "The story didn't say what made them friends," he protested. How do you get a very concrete, literal thinking six year old to imagine, wonder, compare, predict and infer. The joys of teaching. Jesus was a teacher and John's gospel particularly remembers the somewhat complicated imagery that Jesus used.

John tells us that "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying." And later we read, "the people were divided because of his words. Many of them said, 'He is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' But others were saying, 'these are not the words of a crazy man.'" Finally they asked, "How long will you keep us in suspense? Tell us plainly, are you the Messiah?" His exasperated listeners pleaded, "Stop messing with us."

Was Jesus being intentionally confusing in requiring us to use 'higher level comprehension skills' or was he merely doing his best to explain to us rather dense human beings the things of God, which are, by definition, beyond our understanding. For those of us who like Cole, tend to take things literally, who prefer fact to fiction as a way to know the truth about the world, the gospel of John is difficult for us. John throws out these different metaphors that are at once packed with meaning and obscure. In our passage from John today, Jesus begins by talking about himself as a "gatekeeper." "The gatekeeper opens the gate and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

A few verses later, Jesus says, "I am the gate." We know that Jesus wasn't literally a gate, but can you be both gate and gatekeeper? Then he says, "I am the good shepherd." Jesus wasn't a shepherd. We know that he was a carpenter who hung out with fishermen, not a shepherd. It is obvious that we are not to take the Gospel of John literally.

The image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd is so familiar to us, so domesticated, that we are in danger of missing the depth and the power of the image. I can see Jesus looking down on us like a frustrated teacher saying, "I have given you this rich image to explain things to you, but you don't get it." When the Bible speaks in images like this, as it often does, we are not to take it literally, not to try and contain and explain what it means but to let our imaginations go and open ourselves to the mystery that is beyond our understanding. Jesus spoke with images and stories and said look at what is happening in the world around you. See God in all these ordinary things.

So today we look at the image of the shepherd and try to get a glimpse of God.

When you think about the image of shepherd, your thoughts might go in a different direction than mine but maybe my thoughts will inspire yours and together we can come to know God.

I wasn't raised around sheep but I have visited a couple of sheep farms, a small one outside of North Bay where we went to help a friend bring in wood for the winter and a larger one in England where Jean's cousin has a few hundred sheep on the Devon moors. This is what I've come to know about sheep and shepherds. I don't know if what I know is true but I know it helps me to understand God.

- Sheep really like their own shepherd. They do not like strangers. They respond to the voice of the shepherd. On the small farm in North Bay the shepherd I visited had a name for each sheep. God knows me and calls me by name.

- Like other animals, sheep don't meet our standards of cleanliness or politeness. You want to have rubber boots on when you go to the sheep pen. If you are feeding lambs with a bottle, you'd better be ready to steady yourself; they can be a bit pushy. God's ways are sometimes messy; they don't always follow our rules.
- It is difficult to control sheep especially from behind unless you are a sheep dog. Sheep like to be led not prodded or forced. They like to know that the shepherd has checked out the path and that it is safe. The shepherd just has to lead, and hope they follow. If they trust the shepherd, they will follow, anywhere. Like sheep to the slaughter. It is up to us to decide to follow God.
- A good shepherd is responsible for his flock in widest sense: he gathers the sheep together, searches for the lost, tends the sick, guards them from attack, leads them into the safety of the pen and he leads them out to good pasture. God loves and cares for us.

Shortly after our visit, Jean's cousin in England lost 100 of his sheep to thieves. Some things haven't changes since the time of Jesus. There were and are those who sneak into the field or fold, who slip over the wall or up the back road at night. They are hard to guard against. They come to steal and kill and destroy. (Like a virus that can hide in a person without symptoms or a gunman disguised as a policeman. ) If we have strayed from the shepherd, we might find ourselves vulnerable. Who or what are the thieves and bandits that are creeping up on us while we sleep? Consumerism, climate change, gun violence, selfishness, insecurity? For our protection, we sometimes turn to hired hands: we are told to trust the market forces, rely on free trade, protect the economy, but when push comes to shove, these mantras we have turned to don't really care about us but only about their own survival. How are we being deceived into following a way that is not God's way? The secular culture that surrounds us creeps up on us and deceives us. It promises peace and prosperity through greed and consumption. It ignores the cries of the oceans and the plight of the poor. This crisis is reminding us that when one of us suffers, we all suffer. Our good shepherd offers abundant life for everyone and everything.

Even those who aren't a part of our sheepfold. It is comforting to think of God or Jesus as a Good Shepherd who knows us and calls us by name but Jesus called into the fold all sorts of other sheep who didn't belong, to come join us. Does the shepherd's voice sound the same to those others who don't belong as it does to us? How are we supposed to know who belongs and who doesn't? Is it our place to decide? What does it mean that we are all to be one flock with one shepherd? Is our oneness a matter of identity or of purpose? Can we think quite differently about God yet belong to the same flock? Can we agree that God's way is one of peace, justice, mercy and love but express that way differently? Are we going to have to change in order to make room for these others? Do new members to the flock get treated the same as old ones? Are they less important, or more important?

Are there groups in our society who are more likely to be affected by this viral outbreak? What role does one's finances play? I believe that we are finding that those living in poverty are more susceptible.

Let me just play with this image one bit more. God, in the Hebrew scriptures is shepherd to the people of Israel who are the sheep. "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*" Jesus in the gospel is Good Shepherd to his disciples, those who know his voice and follow him. "*I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" I wonder if we can push the image one step further and think of the church as the shepherd of the world. If we are the hands and feet of Christ, are we shepherd to the world? Is it our job to care for the world in the broadest sense, leading it to life and away from danger, binding up its wounds, calling it into the fold where it belongs and away from those voices that only lead to destruction? How can we shepherd our small corner of God's amazing fold?

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. Thanks be for God's unknowable wonder.