

## “Counting Sheep”

John 10 & Rev. 21 & Psalm 23

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In order for there to be sheep – do there have to be goats? That’s what I’ve been thinking about this week. In that scenario the sheep are the good ones; the goats are the bad ones – so the idea is to be part of the flock (sheep), not the herd (goats). Or you can just divide up the sheep, too – into the right flock or wrong flock. The way things are told mostly – to us, to each other, to ourselves, by us – is that the whole point of everything is for you to be a good sheep, in the good flock, with the right shepherd...and so telling the story always requires figuring out who is in and who is out of the flock – who is included, and who is excluded. That’s a big part of the story – seems sometimes like it’s the only story. In order for there to be sheep, there have to be goats. In order to be in the flock, there have to be some out of the flock...the goats; or the bad flock...too – right?

Last week at the end of John’s Gospel we heard Jesus telling Peter to ‘feed my sheep’. This week we’re in the middle, John 10, and it’s all about sheep and shepherds. We hear: ‘I am the Good Shepherd,’ Jesus says – beautiful, evocative imagery of the intimate and unbreakable relationship of Jesus with his flock. But there’s tension and turmoil in these images too - in John there’s no talk of goats, but there is the ongoing question of who is in the right flock or not. Earlier in chapter 10 we hear of thieves and bandits and strangers – wolves and neglectful hired hands – laying down life and claiming it again. And there’s tension too in what we heard today: along with the sheep who know him and have eternal life, Jesus also says to those who question him: ‘you do not belong to my sheep’ – so there!...and some talk too of sheep being snatched away? There is tension going on. Who’s in, who’s out...is that the story?

Then there's Revelation – if you want images, you've come to the right place – rich, scary, beautiful, bizarre images galore. And one way Revelation is understood is having a lot of focus about who's in and who's out. There's no talk of sheep in Revelation, but throughout the book and here in Chapter 7 is the image of the Lamb: Jesus Christ the Lamb of God - the slain, risen, victorious Lamb. And the question always looms – who is with the Lamb? Who is in the flock? That question gets a lot of attention right here in Revelation 7 – just a few verses earlier it says there are 144,000 people in this flock – take a look, that's what it says: 12,000 each from the 12 tribes of Israel ~ 144,000 – that's the flock. That seems to settle it – doesn't seem like very many, but so be it. Except then in verse 9 where we started reading today it says: 'there was a great multitude that no one could count...from every nation, tribe, people, language' – that sounds like more than 144,000 and more than just Israel. More than anyone can count – that's encouraging – but still the question remains: 'who are they?' And the answer we hear is: 'they are the ones who have come through the ordeal – who are washed in the blood of the Lamb.' And the promises given to this flock are powerful and glorious: all brokenness ended; the bitterness of tears replaced with the unending water of life.

At least that's the story for the flock – and the songs we hear from Revelation throughout this season of Easter are stunning in their beauty as they witness to the victory of the Lamb and the joy of those gathered to his flock. But the lectionary passages don't include some other things in Revelation: the images of fire and torment for those outside the flock – the exclusion of the bad ones – passages like this in Revelation: 'the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will

be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.’ Not the flock you want to be in. Who’s in, who’s out? Is that the story?

The idea of: good flock/bad flock, right flock/wrong flock, in flock/out flock – it’s a way of looking at life that pervades every aspect of our lives...and a way of living that I think we can see wreaks havoc on humanity. Between peoples and nations, races and religions, gender and class – in a myriad of ways, we only know how to function by how we divide – through inclusion and exclusion. It is deeply engrained in us that the only way we know who is in, is by also knowing who is out. And it’s clear we find that voice in Scripture too – we can be clear that the church, our Christian religion, knows that outlook and language as well as any. SO that’s what we have to do, right? The Bible says so, so it must be meant for good? And yet even that “holy” message inevitably plays out in perpetuating a culture of divisions – the church as a source of inclusion and exclusion, of in and out. How can the church really speak to the harmful divisions around us and in us, when inclusion and exclusion is the heart of our message too?

But what if that’s not the story God tells – what if the story is not about WHO is in or out, but WHAT is in or out? What if it’s that life is in and death is out; wholeness in, brokenness out; peace in, violence out – what is out is exclusion, and what is in is inclusion. What if we realize that what upsets Jesus is those who are in the religious business of exclusion; what if we ponder in Revelation the stunning image of all peoples included; what if we see in the Lamb the victory of life? The fundamental story of God’s grace – the story of creation and re-creation and new creation – is that life is in and death is out.

I'm not trying to pull a switcharoo that ignores a truth that's uncomfortable to hear; I'm trying to listen together to the way in which all of the images and themes revealed to us are held within and point us to the inclusive reach and embrace of God's grace. The only switcharoo is from the divisions our world has engrained so deeply into us – hearing instead that God calls us to participate in the claim of God's grace on all things. Somehow we've been made to be afraid that to leave behind who's in and who's out means we will lose our bearings, with no real message or leverage or direction. But it's not true – to focus on WHAT is out rather than WHO, to focus on life over death, is to participate in the heart of God: it's the true power to do and to love, to confront and judge, to forgive and challenge, to sacrifice and to endure, to build and hope.

In Revelation 7 there is an intriguing twist on the sheep and shepherd image. I've said that in Revelation there is a lot of focus on the Lamb – and then in v.17 we read: 'the Lamb ...will be their shepherd'. Hmm – a sheep is the shepherd; the Lamb leads the sheep – that is, God becomes like us, with us, to save us. The central image of who God is, is one of God overcoming every divide to reach this world, even embracing our humanity into God's self. The Shepherd Lamb is a stunning reversal that speaks the deep truth that what God is about is that life is in and death is out.

So what do you think? What if we would try it – you and I, and this church, and the church – what if we would try to live and act on the truth that the story is not about which flock you're in, but about us being a flock that knows the story that life is in and death is out? Try it for a day or week or decade or century or

millennium or two...and see how it might wreak havoc on the divisions of peoples and nations, races and religions, gender and class divisions – how the powers of death might quake. I know for myself that I am on that “bad list” in Revelation, and I also know I am in the flock of the Lamb – so I think my story is like yours and everyone’s: needing the truth of life over death. It’s not just that the Lord is my Shepherd – it’s that the Lamb is my Shepherd – and in that mystery we are called to receive and share the story of life...that’s what I’ve been thinking about this week.

Come to this table where death has no place, and life is the meal, and all divisions end in the grace of God. AMEN.