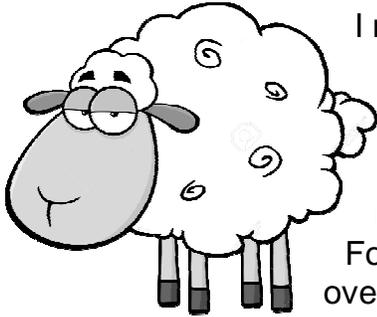


The truth about sheep

Pinegrove, April 26, 2015 (Good Shepherd Sunday)
Pastor Hubert Den Draak



I remember when I was 6 or 7 years old, my mom took me and my kid brother to a nearby park. It had a play area near a petting zoo, and that's where my brother I went to kick a ball around. Now, little boys being, well, little boys, we got a little boisterous and suddenly our ball sailed over the fence into the petting zoo, into the sheep pen to be exact. Fortunately the fence was low enough for our mom to climb over it to get our ball back.

I remember watching her climb over it and step into the sheep pen. However, I wasn't the only one watching my mom... A big ol' sheep just behind my mom was also watching her. And just as she bent over to pick up the ball, that sheep put its head down, lurched forward and butted her in the behind, sending her to the other side of the pen with a loud shriek. People were laughing, my mom was embarrassed, and if sheep could gloat I'm sure that's what that sheep was doing right then and there.

That day my mom (*and I*) learned an important lesson: never underestimate sheep! They have a mind of their own, and they're not as cute and meek as they may appear. Sheep can be pretty tough if they choose to.

That toughness is something to keep in mind next time you hear or read this Psalm. The sheep it talks about are of course the people of Israel, and anyone who is even slightly familiar with the Old Testament stories knows that the people of Israel were a pretty tough AND stubborn bunch. It wasn't so much that they'd be helpless without their shepherding God, but rather that they needed God to stay on track and not be distracted by whatever happened around them, both good and bad - especially the bad, the times of crisis.

The early Christians picked up on that idea during the first 3 1/2 centuries when they were systematically persecuted by the Roman empire. These Christians were not a submissive, docile group of people. Far from it! In those days, when you decided to follow Christ, it meant you would be ridiculed, despised, often thrown in jail and possibly even killed for your faith. That kind of faith takes a lot of guts and determination. These people weren't exactly meek sheep. They had the right stuff, as we'd now say. (BTW, it's interesting to see how Christianity usually flourishes when it is discriminated against, and how it declines when times are easy. Makes you wonder what that says about us, here and now...)

And yet, despite all those very real risks, the Jesus movement grew and grew. They find inventive new ways to organize themselves, creating (often literal) underground networks to worship, to train and educate themselves, and to figure out what they are about. Who are we and what do we believe in? What are we afraid of? What are our strengths? Our weaknesses?

They realized that without Christ's presence, the answers to those big questions would be empty and meaningless. Without Christ's guiding presence they'd be lost. So it's no wonder that they really connected to this image of Christ the Shepherd who would guide them and watch over them and pull them through somehow, even in those very dark times.

Fast-forward about 1800 years to the here and now. All mainline churches in Europe and North America are going through fundamental changes. The United Church, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Baptists and so on, they are all declining. Some more than others, but they all are.

To put it simply: the way we used to be church no longer works. The church that used to be at the centre of society, is now slowly being pushed toward the edges. Some people are very nervous or even upset about it, but I don't believe that this shift is such a bad thing. After all, let's not forget that this is where the church started AND flourished for three-and-a-half centuries: at the *edge* of society.

But even though it may not be a bad thing, it sure is a painful transition. It means change, lots of change. And that means uncertainty, lots of uncertainty. Over the past two years, the United Church has been working hard on how to deal with that big shift we find ourselves in the middle of. How to not only adjust to it, but to thrive in it.

This process is called the Comprehensive Review, and a few weeks ago the recommendations of that review were published. The insert in your bulletin gives you the gist of it in a tiny nutshell. If you read it (and please read it), you will see that that we have to expect some big changes very soon. Here is a brief video that introduces the recommendations...

[Show video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42tCa_hAsxo]

The report asks some pretty big questions: Who are we? What are our strengths? Our weaknesses? What are we afraid of? And most of all: where is Christ calling us? Hmm, interesting... the exact same questions that the first Christian communities asked themselves 1800 years ago!

1800 years ago Christian communities lived on the margins of society, were taken not very seriously, were often ridiculed or even considered a risk to society. But they knew they were not alone in it, and so they painted Christ the Shepherd on the ceilings of the catacombs where they gathered: a reminder of an ever-present Christ, watching over them and guiding them every step of the way, even though they were not sure where Christ was leading them.

I sometimes secretly think we at Pinegrove should do that, too: paint *our* version of Christ the Shepherd on our ceiling here in the sanctuary, in the basement, in the

nursery, in the boardroom - everywhere! As a reminder that *this* is what we're all about.

A balanced budget is important, but not what we're about. Maintaining this beautiful building is important, but we're not about this building. We gather here because we are a community of faith, we are disciples of Jesus the Christ, we believe in God and want to experience God in our lives through Christ.

We usually begin our worship by lighting the Christ candle, as a reminder of Christ's very real presence with us. When we're open to that presence, we no longer will resist change but accept it, even embrace it. When we are brave enough to follow Christ where ever he may lead us, we can be un-afraid. We will fear no evil, even when we have to go through the darkest valley. We'll be able to stand up and go wherever we are called to do ministry. And we will find our cups overflowing and God's goodness and grace following us. We will be like outposts of God's coming kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

That is what we're all about; and with Christ shepherding us, it's something we can be excited about and look forward to. Amen.