

Counting Sheep

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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24



The Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Claim: The relevant and revealant church evokes and forms alternative communities.

Good shepherds are constantly counting their sheep. However, in our contemporary culture we are most often encouraged to count sheep when we struggle with insomnia. It is important for us to realize that God counts sheep, too. God counts sheep to determine the quality of their lives and to create a better world for them. Verse 12 of today's text says, "As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among the scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep."

Sheep, as we know them, can be placed into two basic categories. *Wild Sheep* are high spirited, daring, self-motivated, and self-reliant, climbing higher than any other animal except the mountain goat. On the other hand, *Domestic Sheep* prefer flat and rolling grazing grounds, are largely defenseless, and are in need of constant supervision. They are easily frightened and threatened by change. They have a poor sense of direction and are easily lost, even in their own territory. A good shepherd has to constantly monitor what these sheep eat (what they internalize) because they can very easily feed on poisonous food (and ideas) and die. Ideas like

- God helps those who help themselves.
- Riches and power are signs of God's favor.
- I am the captain of my soul, I am the master of my fate.
- Yes, you can have it all.
- Nurturing, forgiving, and self-sacrifice are less important than winning.

Could it be that the main problem of American religion in the 21st century is that churches are full of domestic sheep?

The words of the prophet Ezekiel are concerned with two other kinds of sheep, the fat and the lean. These can become metaphors for two types of social conditions in our world. Look at verse 21: "Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide."

I believe that the Spirit is saying that we must resist the dominant model of the church in the United States today, which has become captive to and enmeshed within the machinery of hegemony, which produces our kingdoms of race, gender, consumerism, war-making, and heteronormativity instead of critiquing and seeking to dismantle these kingdoms of this world. Today, many of us have been convicted and energized by the Black Lives Matter movement, but we have to be very careful about our goals and objectives. Efforts to simply gain equal rights for the excluded and oppressed do not challenge the dominant culture around us; instead, they make access to it a goal to aspire to. This supports the fiction that by "coming together" the church can

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help create some kind of a sheep fold, some island of safety within the wide sea of sickness that we live in while its frothy tidal waves of blood are snatching the innocents from shore every twenty-eight hours – Oscar Grant, Renisha McBride, Islan Nettles, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner: “I can’t breathe!” Our stained glass windows may keep us from seeing the lean sheep that are all around us, but they are still there. The thick walls of our sanctuaries may muffle the voices of the lean sheep who cry for bread, for safety, for sanctuary, for justice, but they are still there, and God is still counting sheep.

But I am keenly aware that I am a lean sheep and a fat one too. I am a fat sheep because I am obsessed with “stuff” that is paid for by somebody else whom I never have to see. My beloved iPhone is made from minerals extracted from the ground and the lives of people who pay my price in their poverty and lack of peace; I’m loving it! at McDonalds and I don’t even have to see the trees that fall in the rainforest to make more grazing land for the cows that become my Big Mac. I am a fat sheep who lives in the Golden Gate of a state that would completely shut down if we had to go one day without a Mexican. I am a lean sheep when I cuss out white supremacy, but also a fat sheep who can choose not to think about how dangerous it is for women and same-gender-loving people on the same streets that I blithely walk down without a care. God has to count sheep because in so many ways we fail to do so. We of the liberal persuasion assuage a lot of this guilt by glibly proclaiming that, “Another world is possible,” but I still get nervous when I read the words of the prophet that say, “The strong I will destroy; I will feed them with justice,” because I am a lean sheep and a fat one too.

Today God is calling the church to form alternative communities through prophetic ministry: Old Testament scholar and homiletician Walter Bruggemann says, “*The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.*”

You see, the voice of the prophet does not declare that another world is possible, but that another world is coming. Through the prophet Ezekiel God promised the traumatized exiles of Israel a new world and a shaking loose of the underpinnings of the unjust one they were living in when it seemed to make more sense to bow down to the gods of wealth and power of the people who had conquered them. God has promised us not that another world is possible, but that another world is coming through the building of an alternative consciousness and perception that is holy and distinct from the dominant one we are living in now. “*I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.*”

The prophetic work of the church today is to join with God to create this alternative community that is rising from the collateral damage of the American Empire among the injured, the weak, the lost, and the strayed. These are the lean sheep whom white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, materialism, and war-making have pushed and butted to the margins of our world. I can hear the voice of the late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador saying, “In its work among the poor, the

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church may find its own salvation.” No, it is not about “saving” the poor and exploited; it’s about learning from them how to shed our domestication and become wild sheep by joining them in the transformational work of God.

The goal of a church that seeks to be a good shepherd cannot be just to fatten up lean sheep so they can join the others with full bellies and empty hearts, but to question the very idea of becoming fat at someone else’s expense. And it begs the question of how to help domesticated sheep become wild so they can climb to heights of radical inclusion, extravagant grace, and relentless hospitality where they have never been before. It is about taking a congregation that has become comfortable in the flat and rolling pasture of the past and pointing them toward the mountaintops. It is about moving to the margins to find a new center. It is about becoming relevant – not thermometers that simply show the temperature of the times, but thermostats setting the temperature of our times in the will of God, and relevant – The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. It’s about partnering with God to help usher in a new heaven and a new earth. It is about counting sheep.

Amen