

Sheep and Lambs, Part I
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Revelation 5:11-14

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,
¹² singing with full voice,
‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!’
¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and
all that is in them, singing,
‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
for ever and ever!’
¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down and worshipped.

John 21:1-19

¹ After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ ⁶He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ ¹⁶A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ ¹⁷He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’ ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

I’m no shepherd. I’m just another sheep. So the idea of shepherding you through these readings makes me feel, well, a bit like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, to mix my ovine metaphors. The truth is, between these two readings there are inherent mixed (ovine) metaphors. Revelation points to Jesus as the Lamb yet in the end of the gospel of John, Jesus himself refers to his followers, his children, as lambs, for whom Peter is to care. When I am perplexed, or even just a little stymied, by a reading I like to look at known facts but any facts around the readings today really have little to do with the significance of the readings. Was Simon Peter really naked, or wearing just a loincloth? Doesn’t matter. Who were the four living creatures with John of Patmos when all this was revealed to him? Doesn’t matter.

What matters is an earlier part of Revelation which did not make the cut for today’s lectionary selection. Just a bit earlier in chapter five, John weeps because he believes no one is worthy to open the scroll and its seals in order to usher in God’s coming reign. An elder says to him, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”¹ Immediately John looks, and instead of seeing a Lion, he sees “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.”² The Lion and the Lamb are one in the same. The one with the greatest power is also the one who gave himself as a sacrifice.

¹ Revelation 5:5.

² Revelation 5:6.

In a time when lions were a tool of the Roman Empire, most famously used against Christians in the Coliseum, here is a lion on the side of Christians, one greater than any lion at Rome's disposal. Yet, rather than attack the people with fierce and frightening power, this lion uses that power to subdue all the others, even the power of death, through its own death, appearing as a lamb which has been sacrificed. And while it is fitting that a lion would, through claim or conquest, receive power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing, all are given to the lamb, who doesn't seek any of them. How contrary! A docile, sweet, vulnerable creature, one that could be corralled by even a child, is the one named to have blessing and honor and glory and might, instead of the lion, whom even the strongest warrior may not overcome.

This reign of God, from the very beginning has been a topsy-turvy one and, when God's people were beyond forgetting, Jesus came to remind them in lesson and in action. Revelation suggests this upside-down way is everlasting with the everlasting kingdom of God, with a Lamb in the lead. What that means in this earthly realm is the same, upside-down and topsy-turvy. Jesus closes our reading from John telling Peter that one day he will be led to a terrible death. Rather than do what he can to avoid it, to seek protection, Jesus instead tells Peter that his work is to care for the lamb-like, those in this world without the power to wield as the lions of the world do. Jesus does not instruct him to court the powers that be, to make nice with those who persecuted and executed Jesus. Court those who can do nothing for him; care for those who can do nothing for him, feed them and tend them, these sheep and lambs who are the flock of Christ.

Eleven chapters earlier in John, Jesus tells them over and over that he is the shepherd. He speaks of his flock – one flock, one shepherd – and says that **he** is the good shepherd. Our author's commentary adds that "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them."³ We know because we sit here, because we are part of a community of care, that the disciples finally understood, Peter especially, but today's reading from John might have otherwise left us nervous. It opens with "After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples" who, AGAIN, did not recognize him

³ John 10:6.

right away. The “these things”? Thing number one: Jesus shows himself to Mary Magdalene. Thing number two: Jesus shows himself to the disciples, except Thomas. Thing number three: Jesus shows himself to the disciples, including Thomas. “After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples...”

In today’s reading they finally identified Jesus after he had pointed them to a fishing haul of one hundred fifty-three fish. And in this is the Lion who behaves like the Lamb. Jesus has the power to fill the nets of fisherfolk and he does so for their benefit, not his own. He feeds them. And, in what has been perceived as Peter’s redemption story – a counter to his three denials of Jesus is his set of three professions of love for Jesus – Jesus instructs Peter to go and feed. The abundance with which he should feed them is implicit. Feed **my** lambs, tend **my** sheep, feed **my** sheep. Do for them as I have done for you. Perhaps the first use of “be a lamb, would you”?

Like I said when I began, I’m no shepherd, but another sheep. When things got rough, when Jesus was suddenly gone, even **after** he gave proof of the resurrection of the body, where do we find the disciples but back at their old ways, fishing, fending for themselves. When things go south, we all tend to shrink into the familiar, to go back to looking after ourselves. So Jesus comes and does not scold but instead redirects – there is work still to be done in my name, in my place. Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. I am a sheep among sheep but, in this flock, that means that I am a sheep for other sheep – we are sheep for one another. That doesn’t mean doormats – not in this flock – it means we keep from looking only after ourselves. It means we follow the redirection of the shepherd. It means, for one another, be a lamb, would you?

Let us pray: O Lord our Shepherd, when we feel vulnerable and simple, remind us that we have your power as your people, we pray. Amen.