

May God's grace be in these words and upon you his people.

I returned to an early habit this week. When I was in my first year at seminary, I took a class given by Professor David Rhodes called Scripture by Heart. Professor Rhodes had committed the book of Mark to memory. He often presented it as an oral narrative to churches and affiliated organizations. David eventually memorized all the gospels, but it was my initial experience of his presentation of Mark that made an indelible impression on my memory.

I took his class in order to develop a discipline of memorization, and stimulate my brain. Because I have to be honest, people. I have that old people's disease called CRS.

I managed to commit an entire book to memory. The book of Job. Now before you get all excited, you need to know it is a short book—only four chapters.

However, I discovered something extraordinary in this venture. You learn as you go through the repetitions of reading in order to memorize that the scriptures come alive. They seem to take on a life of their own. Amazing insights happen, things you would never have noticed otherwise. It's like you can see between the lines.

I had to abandon my newfound discipline. I found that parish ministry seem to gobble up memorization time.

This week's gospel text wasn't very long, and I had the time for some memory work. It was kind of fun and challenging to return to an early habit. I'm glad I did. Lots of between the lines insights! For one thing, I discovered that the lectionary had skipped over Jesus' miracle of feeding the multitude with five loaves and two fish. Which, by the way, is a story for another day?

I now saw these boat rides as bookends between a huge miracle. No wonder they needed some peace and quiet, Jesus and his cadre had just served up dinner to 5000 hungry souls. But that's yet another story and a message for another day.

What has been running through my thoughts this week is this: the people were like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd. It's a metaphor we hear time and time again in Holy Scripture. God is our shepherd. We are his flock. And flocks equal sheep.

At first blush, being compared with sheep seems like a warm fuzzy notion. Sheep are kinda cute, fleecy docile creatures with limpid eyes. . .grazing peacefully in the green pastures and being obediently led by the still waters. Who can resist the magnetic sweetness of baby lamb??

Well, I hate to burst your bubble folks. Sheep aren't the smartest creatures in the animal kingdom. On the IQ scale, they are probably right down there with the ostrich. The largest bird in our planet has a brain the size of a pea. The story goes that one afternoon a shepherd came upon two coyotes that had stealth fully crept right into the midst of the flock. There they had killed a lamb and were eating it. The other sheep just stood around watching them. They were oblivious to the danger. Sheep are dim-witted when it comes to comprehending danger. They have no means of defense: no claws, no sharp teeth, no terrible horns. They can't climb trees or squirt mace like a skunk. They can't fly away. They have no protective camouflage, or scary roars to frighten their enemies. No spiky needles or armored plate. Sheep are totally vulnerable to predators.

And if you have ever had the pleasure of meeting one of those fleecy creatures close up, you know that they stink. I had that privilege when I visited Williamsburg VA a few years ago. They looked so totally charming in their pastoral setting. Until I got close up close and personal. Their thick unshorned fleece seems to be a haven for every foul smelling barn yard odor there is.

Kelly Fryer in her book, *No Experience Necessary*, relates her experience of hiking in the pastoral hillocks of the British Isles. She observed a lone, unkempt, dirty sheep on the crest of one of those hills. As soon as it spotted her, it began charging her maniacally. She hightailed it over one of the rocky fences, and left more than a bit shaken. When she got back to the village she went to the local constable to report this crazed sheep she had seen. He explained what happened. It's scrapies. The sheep wandered off, and when it wasn't sheared regularly, it got infested with parasites. And they attack the brain and central nervous system. It's like the sheepish version of mad cow disease.

And one more unflattering characteristic—they are notorious for straying off. They all have a grass-is-greener DNA strand. They'll wander off in the blink of an eye.

Isaiah 53:6. **We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;**

Sheep that graze in the rocky highlands of Scotland find the vegetation sparse and spare. But they can smell the tender grass growing on the ledges of the cliffs below them. The grass is lush and fragrant, because it hasn't been grazed down by the sheep. When a young lamb smells the grass, it will venture down the cliff, jumping catlike, and land on all fours ten or twelve feet down to the grassy ledge. The lamb eats until it is satisfied. But then, it cannot get back up the rocky cliffside. Bleating pitifully, it struggles unsuccessfully to make it back to the hilltop. There is no way it will get back up the cliffside on its own.

Sheep need to get ride of their foul smelling fleece on a regular basis
Sheep think the grass is greener
Sheep are vulnerable to predators
Sheep get lost and experience pitfalls

Hmmm. . . .sound like anyone you know????

Jesus saw the crowd, and they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he had compassion for them,, and began to teach them many things.

This word, 'compassion' as it comes from the Greek, doesn't mean to feel sorry for, or to have pity on. It goes deeper than that. . .it means to have great empathy for combined with action on behalf of. To feel and to act. Quite literally it means to be moved in the bowels. That's a sit down and take notice word.

That is the mark of a real shepherd. To have regard for the sheep's well being and to take action on behalf of it.

A visitor to the middle east noted a flock of sheep in a pen in a rural setting. He remarked to the shepherd that it must be a particularly peaceful, safe area, because he saw no gate on the sheep pen. The shepherd replied, "I am the gate." The sheep have to get through me in order to get to green pasture, and predators have to deal with me if they try to get into the pen.

We have all heard this before: Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. SHEEP NEED A SHEPHERD!! They need a good shepherd!

Without a shepherd, without a good shepherd here's what can happen.

NEGLECT The whole flock suffers neglect—the uncaring shepherd abandons his sheep, ignores his sheep, shortchanges his sheep.

ABUSE: The flock suffers abuse—the sheep get fleeced by the shepherd, or wolves in sheep's clothing, but not in a good way!!

REBELLION: Individual sheep rebel—they would rather be on their own than following anyone or anything—they have no use for shepherds.

APATHY: The sheep becomes apathetic—with less than caring leadership, it wanders off, just a little bit at a time, until it becomes hopeless lost.

Like sheep without a shepherd. I can't help but think of the misguided Michael Jackson. So hopelessly lost, that he lived in a narcotic twilight, induced by powerful sedatives and anaesthetizers. And it cost him his life. Remember the story about the wolves devouring the lamb while the rest of the sheep looked on? How often do we see the mortal dangers of overdose and addiction—and cluelessly believe it can't happen to us?

Our spiritual lives are in jeopardy when search for greener pastures in order to fill emotional holes eating inside us. Sometimes it looks like we have it all together. The big house, the nice car, great job. But oftentimes we're on the ledge of despair, in debt up to our ears trying to pay for all these hole fillers. Or maybe there's abuse in our picture perfect life, unfaithfulness, despair, illness, or depression. We can spend our lives and our fortunes on seeking hole fillers . . . remember the woman who had a hemorrhage and spent all she had seeking cures? We feel like we're scraping bottom.

Remember that lamb, the one who was stranded on the cliff. The shepherd hears his cries, he's mindful of the lamb's plight. But he waits. He waits to rescue the lamb until it is weak from hunger and thirst and truly helpless. Because if he tries to get to it any sooner, it will shy away from his helping hands in fright and rush headlong over the cliff to its destruction. And so it is not until the lamb has crashed and burned that he begins the process of rescue.

You see friends, there is only one real hole filler. Only one pasture that is truly greener. Only one shepherd who is truly the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the one. He is the gate. He is the way. Scripture says he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus gathers us one helpless shepherdess lamb at a time, because he has compassion for us and brings us home into the larger flock.