

Sermon for April 22, 2018 (Easter4B) “Shepherding”
(Based on the first letter of John 3:16-24 and the gospel of John 15:1-8)

One of the first things I learned from being around sheep was that all the Sunday School art I grew up with lied to me. That shining man with the golden tresses and the pristine white robe belonged in a shampoo ad, not a sheepfold. Seriously-- *those* sandals weren't made for running, and *that* Jesus never fought off a wolf. And have you ever seen the belly and backside of a lamb during mud season? The man in those paintings certainly hadn't nuzzled or picked up or carried a wiggly, messy, spring lamb.

How many of you have ever cared for sheep, or goats? Horses? Cows? Pigs? How many of you have seen them being born? How many of you have seen one injured or killed by a predator? How many of you have lost an animal to illness, or had to bury the dead?

Small wonder the hired hand runs away. There are some jobs that have always been hard to recruit for—some jobs that have challenged workers of every generation. And this particular work had a PR problem long before Jesus—because it's earthy work, and therefore somehow less valuable, the opposite of pride and glory and glamour...and it's what the world needs right now, more than anything.

Just outside the door, in the top few inches of soil, there are worms and grubs and nematodes, and the almost-invisible filaments of mushrooms, stretching out for connection.

Down where the massive ledges rise at the ocean's edge, there are barnacles reaching the tiny fans of their hands out into the tidal flow, waving for attention.

Out in the blueberry barrens, the bees fan their wings in desperate dances, stressed by too few sources of pollen, the chemical cropdust erasing their sense of how to navigate home.

In the woods, lynx and moose and bear petition us from the damaged shadows, all the sheltering old-growth of their ecosystem long ago turned to lumber and paper in the mills, the younger trees struggling with acid rain and invasive insects.

Up above the treeline that skirts the ancient craigs, rock voles and Bigelow sedge cling to their tiny niches, isolated and endangered, trying to keep the balance, whispering into the wind their longings to survive.

Out in the salt marshes, the wild ducks preen their feathers nervously, seeking safe nesting space.

Out in the estuaries, near streams where Atlantic salmon once came to spawn, the fiddleheads are getting ready to unfurl. Speckled trout lily and trillium are folding their blossoms to pray.

What the whole sacred earth is asking of us is that reclaim our place among all these cousins, hold ourselves accountable to the rest of Creation, give up the bored pose, stop pretending we're hired hands who can just give up and run away. Where is this “away” we're so fond of imagining? Do you know that the health of the entire earth, just like us, depends on a circulatory system, and everything we pour down the drain, everything we burn or toss in a landfill, every convenient bit of plastic and coal dust and mercury returns, one way or another, to say, “there is no away?”

Did you know the currents of the oceans and the currents of the atmosphere echo each other, shaping the patterns of weather in a complex, harmonious, and awesome dance. Did you know that the tiny shrimp called krill spend their lives pulling carbon from the air into the ocean, and stirring the seas so everything there can eat and breathe? Did you know that, in the few day after 9/11, when all commercial U.S. & Canadian planes were grounded, NASA scientists measured the atmosphere to study the effects? Without the 4,000 flights a day burning jet fuel and leaving their trails of water vapor—in that brief three-day respite—the skies actually began to cool and clear. The extra heat trapped near the earth's surface was able to disperse. The climate began to heal.

We have the capacity, as followers of Christ, as human participants in this ecosystem of Eden, to act out of love, to make choices on behalf of more than our own lives. We have made so many choices that erred on the side of death, extracting resources, cheering ourselves on for our increased consumption and cheap power, ignoring the true global costs... but we still have an opportunity to change that legacy.

The good shepherd draws on a different kind of power—the power to lay down our spirits, our psyches, our lives, for the sake of others. If you can be that tender, that loving, the power of the good shepherd will strengthen you—to travel rough places, to keep vigil in dark

valleys, to face and even fight the wolves.

Stephanie Raymond understands the challenge and responsibility of this power. She is an environmental educator who moves with respect and grace between whale-watching tourists and crowded school classrooms. And she cautions against the “hired hand” mentality. There's a danger in our Christian tradition, she says, to claim that, since “we're all sinners and it can't be helped,” we can just check out. At the same time, we moralize about the dire consequences of not acting, which is hard on those who live with anxiety or get easily overwhelmed.

You know all those Earth day lists that show up each year, full of “green” ideas that fade as quickly as New Year's resolutions, with the same frustration and guilt? Raymond offers an alternative: five actions with a long-term, meaningful impact on the earth that will help us handle some of our challenges without calling ourselves saints or sinners, without shame or anxiety:

1) TAKE A SHOWER. Because you don't want to smell bad, right? You don't want to have that negative impact on the other people around you. And it feels good to be clean. That's why we shower. Why don't we look at helping the earth in the same way? Instead of viewing recycling, composting, choosing less damaging products and considering the impacts of our choices as “chores undertaken by the virtuous,” think of them the same way we think of brushing our teeth or taking a shower. They are actions that are good for us, help us stay healthy, and make things pleasant for those around us as well.

2) FORGIVE YOURSELF FOR BEING HUMAN. We grew up within systems that were developed over long centuries of smaller populations, systems that glorify hoarding and overconsumption as signs of status. We all have the effects of that stamped on our psyches. We have also seen, in person or on the news, evidence of the damage we've done and are doing to Earth's life-sustaining systems. But that does NOT mean that humans are shut out from Eden, a blight on the Earth. In fact, she says, thinking this way is an easy cop-out; if we are inherently terrible, then there's no point in trying to fix the mess we've made.

But we humans are still part of the flock: a species that needs to learn how to live more in balance with the rest of the species on the planet. So, gently acknowledge the damage you've done, and turn your attention towards more vital work: help figure out new and better systems

that work in harmony with, instead of harming, the processes that keep us alive. And if you forget to bring your reusable shopping bag to the store one day, forgive yourself and try again tomorrow.

3) GIVE THANKS. Consider that every single object you possess, every morsel of food you consume, every drop of water you drink comes from global systems that provide the raw materials to make those things and get them to you. Cultivating gratitude for how the earth sustains us is a good way to undo the lie of our separation from Nature. Take a moment before meals to acknowledge everything that brought that meal to you--sun, rain, soil, the pollinators, the workers, the fossil fuels that transported it. You don't have to recite a flowery, poetic grace (unless you want to). Be silent a moment. Give thanks that the food that's about to become part of your body is connecting you to the rest of the world.

4) GET OUT AND OBSERVE. Wherever you are, you can see the life-sustaining natural processes of Earth taking place around you. If you take walks or hikes, if you fish or hunt or go boating, you know this: spending even a few minutes a day outside will help you better understand your connection. If you feel inspired, take further steps to learn more about the plants, animals, weather patterns, and climate of the place where you travel and live. Study after study shows that spending just a short time outdoors each day reduces stress and anxiety, improves mood, lowers blood pressure, and provides other health benefits. (And I think I can safely add: living in Maine makes this one easy!)

5) RECONSIDER YOUR CONSUMPTION. Most of the physical stuff we acquire in our lifetimes is not stuff we keep a long time, and the world is running out of places to put things. So when you are about to acquire something new, ask yourself: 1) Do I really need this? 2) If I do, do I need to get a brand-new one? 3) How long will it last? And 4) What will I do with it (or its packaging) when I'm done? Exactly what you do to reduce your consumption of resources is not the issue, it is that you think about it and do what you can, when you can. Start small, think about what makes sense for you and would be easy to adjust, and go from there. Consider that while recycling is good and helpful, reducing overall consumption of material goods has a much greater impact on resource use.

The natural systems that sustain us are not infinite. We CAN damage them beyond repair. But they are also very resilient. I have personally witnessed ecosystems written off as

hopelessly damaged come back to support thriving wildlife, just given a little nudge by human hands making a thoughtful effort to help. I think if we focus more on recognizing our inherent and inescapable connections to these systems instead of How Bad Everything Is, we will be much more successful in bringing things back into balance. And that is something that we can work on every single day, not just Earth Day.

Shepherding—it doesn't require a white robe or a special glow. What the earth needs is your thankfulness and your thoughtfulness, your joy, your courage in the face of grief. Your feet, running after a silly lamb. Your voice, calling others home. Your hands, playing in the dirt, touching the holy mess of this sacred land.

*--Preached by Rev. Holly Morrison, pastor
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