

*“Befuddled by Faith ”*

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*Text: Psalm 23*

A Psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.

*John 10:1-11*

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

Wikipedia defines photomontage as “the process (and result) of making a composite photograph by cutting and joining a number of other photographs. The composite picture is sometimes photographed so that the final image is converted back into a seamless photographic print.” Often the tiny photos share the theme of the larger picture, and they are juxtaposed according to their lightness and darkness to capture the larger image in question. It may have seemed a bit kitsch when first attempted, but there are some quite famous ones now – Abe Lincoln and John F. Kennedy and Barak Obama composed of tiny photos of other political figures, and Che Guevara, made up of revolutionary leaders around the world. The cover of the Economist this week has one of Osama bin Laden. There’s a very cute and clever one out there of a penguin.

We often make a simpler, home-made version when someone dies – placing photos from a life side by side, sometimes grouped by era, and other times just interspersed, with a school portrait from the forties right up next to a family Christmas from last year, or a canoe trip twenty years back. Some photos are faded sepia, other snapshots will have those crinkly edges, (or remember polaroids), and others may have been downloaded and printed by ink-jet. Despite the disparity and perhaps because of it, we receive a composite impression of a life. Sometimes the unmatched, side by side images tell us something that wouldn't come through in a more orderly narrative. The incongruity itself may give us a glimpse of the complexity of the person – some insight otherwise hidden.

Reading the Bible can have a bit of the same feel as looking at a montage. We see the individual stories and books and letters – it's a jumble of kings and commandments and natural disasters, healings and miracles and philosophy – each one may have its own significance, but if truth be told they don't match very well. What we hope for as we read and study together is that we will perceive bigger picture, a richer message that emerges from all the detail.

This passage from the Gospel of John is really a montage too. It's a whole set of images cascading one after the other, snapshots laid side by side. And they don't match. Is Jesus the Gate? Or is he the gatekeeper? Or the Shepherd? Wait a minute, isn't he supposed to be the Lamb? Yes. All of the above. The instability of the metaphors keeps us wondering ... but, do sheep wonder?

That is, *are we* like sheep? The music as the choir sang it adds to the profusion of the imagery – in a new sound layer for the montage we have the perfect depiction of the human tendency to moral confusion and chaos. Gone astray. Running off in all directions, not knowing where to turn.

It turns out though, that being like a sheep isn't necessarily all that bad. Barbara Brown Taylor writes this:

... most of us think of sheep as slobbering, untidy, *dumb* animals who exist only to be shaved or slaughtered.

Imagine my delight, then, when I discovered last Tuesday that someone I know actually grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest and that according to him sheep are not dumb

at all. It is the cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumour, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. According to my friend, cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows, my friend said, but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first – namely, their shepherd – who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.<sup>1</sup>

So perhaps that is somewhat better, puts a whole new spin on the expression *herding cats*. The kind of community solidarity that Nikhil read about in the story about the early church from the Book of Acts happens because people are following together, not being herded. You can't force that.

Along with the question of who he is, and who we are, there is the question of his voice. Remember, in the garden near the tomb, it is his voice that allows Mary Magdalene to recognize Jesus as the risen Christ. And here too, the sheep will know him by his voice. As Christians, then, we are told that we should listen for his voice, and that we will recognize it because we belong to him. But here we see the lovely irony of the Gospel of John – they are sitting listening to Jesus, who is talking to them face to face, they are hearing his actual voice – he says, *the sheep will follow him because they know his voice*, and next we read that, *Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what they were told...*

And then in the very next verse he changes the metaphor again! Gate, shepherd, sheep, gatekeeper, voice ... No wonder they are scratching their heads, befuddled. We are too. But our befuddlement has a purpose.

According to one commentator, we should treat this like a Zen *koan*, “in which the challenge is to live into its delicacy.... befuddlement is meant to draw us away from the distracters and into the subtlety...”<sup>2</sup> Don't be distracted by all the mixed up metaphors – indeed, we can let that instability draw us toward the larger point that Jesus is making. *I have come that you may have life in all its fullness*. Abundant life in

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 140-141.

<sup>2</sup> Shannon Michael Pater, *Feasting on the Word*, A2, 444.

some translations. Abundant life is the bigger vision that all the shifting images and flickering metaphors work together to produce.

Actually, it probably doesn't hurt to cultivate a bit of befuddlement in our faith. Sometimes cut and dried answers aren't the best ones. That was certainly the perspective of the Faith Exploration group that Eric took part in before deciding to join Bloor Street. It is good to wonder together – what is the fullness of life that we are called to? It is good not to be too sure.

One thing we know, life in all its fullness is not going to be lived in a sheep-pen. God's whole world is our dwelling place. A good shepherd leads us in to safety and rest, but also out, to adventure and new pasture. We imagine the sheep stepping out of the enclosure tentatively, sniffing the fresher air. As we heard in the Psalm, the shepherd takes us along by paths of righteousness. Paths of righteousness are not always straight or straightforward. The Hebrew word *ma'aglei-tzedek*, means, literally, roundabout ways that end up in the right direction.<sup>3</sup> The shepherd helps them pick their way through the deep shadowed valleys and the high mountain paths – narrow and twisting, sometimes in the fog, sometimes rock-strewn.

Each one of us can recall times when embracing life in all its fullness has meant navigating paths that are complicated and treacherous. That is the price of living outside the sheep-pen. Choices, and losses, and uncertainties are the rule and not the exception. It's wise to listen for a voice that will give guidance about when to turn, when to stop, when to boom ahead.

So let us follow along together, sometimes befuddled, always listening for that voice. Let this lovely world be our dwelling place, and let us live life in all its fullness, the fullness of God's love. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Harold Kushner, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, 74.