

John 10:1-10

By Rev. Chad Langdon

There's a fairly popular book right now that has been made into a movie on Netflix. The movie releases in just a couple weeks and stars Sally Field. It's called, "Remarkably Bright Creatures." Has anybody read this or familiar with it? It has been on the NT Times Bestseller list for well over a year now. It's about sweet elderly widow who forms an unlikely friendship with an octopus at the aquarium where she works. In the book, you're introduced to the octopus and you learn just how intelligent these creatures are, and it portrays him with the ability to solve complex puzzles, escaping from his locked tank on a nightly basis, understanding human behavior and even recognizing people by their fingerprints. I think the book probably exaggerates a little bit, but from what I've read, octopuses are actually quite intelligent, hence the "remarkably bright creatures" title. It's a sweet story and the movie definitely looks like it'll be worth a watch. Remarkably bright creatures.

Do you know what other animal could fit that title? Sheep. I did some research into this too. Turns out that sheep can learn medicine. They know what plants can help them feel better and they will return to those medicinal plants time and time again if they get sick. They seem to be pretty self-aware and can watch TV. Sheep can be emotional and much prefer hanging out with other happy sheep or happy people, and will actually turn away from angry sheep or angry shepherds. And they can be compassionate too. Jeffery Massom, in his book called, "The Pig Who Sang to the Moon" tells the story of Rammo, a male ram sheep who formed a compassionate bond with Whisper, a cow who was born blind. Rammo would graze next to this blind cow all day long and guide her around the field, making sure that she didn't bump into the fence or any posts. When Whisper gave birth to a calf, Rammo, took on the role of a father and kind of parented the young cow. When Whisper finally died of an infection, Rammo mourned her and grieved enormously, standing by her dead body, bleating and crying for a long time. Sheep are remarkably bright creatures. And finally, perhaps relevant to our Gospel reading, science has proven what Jesus already knew, that sheep can indeed recognize faces and voices... up to 50 different ones, in fact. Sheep know their shepherds. Now, granted, I'm sure not all sheep are remarkably bright. There are probably some exceptions.



But the fact remains, that sheep do know their shepherds. And perhaps that's why sheep and shepherds become important analogies throughout scripture. Not only were the people of the Bible much more familiar with sheep than we probably are, but the personalities of the sheep are remarkably like ourselves – smart, emotional, communal, compassionate, and even, often maybe, a bit obstinate and prone to do dumb things from time to time.



But in John 10, which we read from today, I don't think Jesus makes these comparisons to lift up our sheepiness. Instead, I think, Jesus gives this little sermon to highlight the value of his shepherdness. And like with us and sheep, there are some commonalities between Jesus and regular shepherds. It is the shepherd's job to care for the sheep, make sure they're ok, make sure that they are protected and have what they need – be it in the sheep pen or out in the field. Jesus does these things for us and shepherds do them for their sheep. Jesus contrasts himself with thieves and bandits, who he says come in to steal, kill and destroy... and I'm sure we can think of people like that in our world – people who seem to leave wreckage, destruction and chaos in their wake, wherever they go. But not Jesus. Jesus says he came that we may have life and have it abundantly. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. And this Good Shepherd knows our names, knows your name. And he knows your personality, and he knows what's in your heart – what breaks it, what fills it with love or courage or peace, and he even knows how many hairs are on your head. Jesus knows everything about us, and as he says, he wants us to have life and have it abundantly. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

But there is one part of this Good Shepherd speech that I just find a bit ridiculous. If you were to keep reading in John 10, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. And the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Really? I don't care how much you love sheep, or how much a shepherd loves their sheep, or how remarkably bright they might be...but there is no way that a shepherd is putting their life on the line or dying for their sheep. Sheep are sheep, shepherds are people. People trump sheep every time...sorry sheep. But that just speaks to the ridiculous, amazing love that Jesus does have for us. He does lay down his life for us. He does leave the 99 to go find the one lost sheep. He does risk it all. He does lose his life for our sake...even when we are just some dumb sheep. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but therein lies the beauty of it and how much Jesus actually values each and every one of us, how much Jesus values you. You are not just a sheep to him. You have a name. You have a personality. You have gifts and talents and a purpose that you may not even realize. Jesus thinks that you are of such incredible worth that he really is willing to die for you. He does. He did. That is the kind of love that he is

professing to these sheep, to each of us, and that is why he went to the cross. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who does lay down his life for the sheep.

So, I think the question becomes, What do we do with that? How do we, how should we respond to that love, to that gift, to his sacrifice? How should we respond to our Good Shepherd? Something else I learned about sheep recently is that sheep are notorious creatures of habit... kinda like some humans, I know (like Lutherans). Phillip Keller, in his book called, "A Shepherd's Look at Psalm 23" says this. "If left to themselves, sheep will follow the same trails until they become ruts; graze the same hills until they turn to desert wastes; pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites." He says that not only will sheep eat the grass in a particular field or pasture, but they will eat the grass down to the roots and, if left there long enough, will even dig up the roots with their hooves...thus leaving a trail of destruction and utter waste that the land simply cannot recover from. Its like they can become their own worst enemies – staying, eating and destroying... kinda like those bandits & thieves. Churches and people can do this too – get stuck in ruts, or become their own worst enemies. Churches are notoriously bad at change and adapting. Many have been known to do the same liturgy or sing the exact same hymns until the congregation becomes a spiritual wasteland. By golly, no one is gonna lead us down any new or right pathways, even if it does say that in Psalm 23. There's gotta still be some roots here we can dig out and eat. We get trapped or get stuck. And even if someone – like the Holy Spirit or the Good Shepherd comes along to free us, opens the door to a new opportunity, to give us life or hope, too often we end up right back in the ditch (like this sheep here).



So much for remarkably bright creatures. This is why we need the Good Shepherd, our Good Shepherd. This is why we need the cross. This is why we need forgiveness and grace. Because on our own, we will just keep doing this. We need a different way. And that, my friends, is why Jesus opens the gate for us, offers us a different way than we might be used to, or a different way than the rest of the world, perhaps a different pasture to enjoy... if we will just follow him. I'm not sure what that new life or new opportunity might look like for you. But I do know our Good Shepherd wants you to have life and life abundantly. That's why he died and rose again. New life & resurrection is possible. Our job as sheep is recognize that our Good Shepherd is Jesus. He is the one. He is the one who gives us that new life, and our job as sheep is to follow him in faith wherever he might be leading us. Amen.