

Fourth Sunday of Easter C

May 8, 2022

Reflection by Sister Belinda Monahan, OSB

Acts 13:14, 43-52; Psalm 100:1-2, 3-5; Revelations 7:9, 14b-17; John 10:27-30

When I first read today's Gospel, I thought, "Great. Sheep. Finally, something I am comfortable talking about." The longer I sat with the Gospel though, the more uncomfortable I became. In today's Gospel, as both the Gospel acclamation and the psalm make abundantly clear, *we* are the sheep, with God as our shepherd. As any of us who have actually encountered sheep outside of picture books and petting zoos, that isn't necessarily a flattering comparison. In my experience, sheep tend to spend most of their days eating—and they don't smell that great. To put it mildly, they are not all that bright; left to their own device, they tend to get themselves in trouble. They see someplace where the food looks better than what they are currently eating and they wander off after it and then they get themselves in trouble that they can't get themselves out of. Because they are herd animals, when one wanders off, the whole flock is likely to follow. Despite their willingness to follow each other, good luck getting them to follow someone they don't know, even if that person is trying to lead them out of trouble. What exactly *is* Jesus trying to tell us with this metaphor?

I don't want to speak for anyone else here, but if I'm honest with myself, there are parts of that description that fit me more than I'd like to admit. But leaving aside whether the comparison with sheep is particularly flattering, the king as shepherd is a common metaphor in the greater near east and Israel long before Jesus arrived on the

scene. It implies a mutual relationship, in which the king—the shepherd—tends the flock, and the flock, the sheep, the people, us, return everything we have, everything we are to shepherd on whom we are completely dependent.

Today's first reading gives us a fairly good idea of what it might mean to give everything back to God. Although it is frustratingly out of order from the weekday readings from Acts, Paul and Barnabas having been selected for the task, are traveling through places that are unfamiliar to them spreading the Gospel. In the face of violent abuse, they do not change their message or stop preaching—they expand their audience and reach out to others—facing the possibility of even more violent abuse. Even being expelled does not deter them. They follow Jesus' instructions to his disciples—they shake the dust from their feet and move on.

But being realistic—very few of us at this point in community history are headed to unfamiliar places to spread the good news. So what does that mean for us sheep here at the monastery? Maybe it means spreading the good news in more familiar places—how do we live as a light to the people we encounter daily, while we are shopping or at the doctors' office? Or even if we don't leave the monastery, what good news do we share with those we encounter here—our employees or perhaps most difficult—each other?

The second reading illustrates the fruits of this evangelical labor—people from every nation, race, people, and tongue “who have made their robes clean in the blood of the Lamb.” Because Jesus in the Gospel can claim to know his sheep because he is

one of us—he is both the lamb of God who gave himself up for us—who gives us his very body at this altar—*and* the shepherd. He became one of us—a smelly, not so bright sheep, in order to lead us to God. If Jesus—God—could accept that discomfort, surely I can do the same.