

April 25, 2021 - [Fourth Sunday of Easter](#)

Acts 4:8-12

Psalms 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29

1 Jn 3:1-2

Jn 10:11-18

By Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D.

Today's Gospel is all about "sheep and shepherds" – an unfamiliar topic for urbanized U.S. Catholics. In the U.S. in 2020, approximately 57.23 million people lived in rural areas, compared to 272.91 million in urban areas. With little "sheep experience," it is easy to believe stereotypical shepherd/sheep images, missing Jesus' message in today's Gospel!

Jesus and his audience likely had abundant practical knowledge of sheep and shepherding, with religious understandings from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) that carried profound personal and communal moral meaning. But what can **we** learn from this?

The Hebrew Bible provides many heroic models, whose vocation was shepherding, e.g., Rachel (*Genesis* 29:9), Lipporah (*Exodus* 2:16-21), David 1 (Samuel 17:34-36), or Moses (*Exodus* 3:1). Plausibly, Jesus had such exemplars in mind. Significantly, Jesus knew and esteemed the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. The prophets challenged the injustices and immorality of Israel and its leaders. In *John*, Jesus' intent was holding the leaders/shepherds of his day to an even higher standard (*Matthew* 5:17-18).

Particularly relevant to Jesus' message is *Isaiah* 56:9-12, where the prophet excoriates the corrupt leaders of Israel, for turning a blind eye to injustices, living a cushy lifestyle while neglecting the suffering people, lazily remaining ignorant of people's needs, and selfishly coveting the prosperity of others. In contrast to this, Isaiah announces God's promise of peace to those leaders who are just.

In *Ezekiel* 34, God is the true shepherd of Israel (Ps. 80:1; cf. Ps. 23:1; Isa. 40:10–11), and God rails at the inept cruel "shepherds" of Israel (Ezek. 34:1-10). God knows the "shepherds" and the "sheep" and rescues the vulnerable from the "shepherds." Where Ezekiel points to King David (Ezek. 34:23) as God's choice to rescue Israel from injustice, St. John now points us to Jesus.

Like the earlier prophets, Jesus critiques the unworthy caretaking by Israel's current "shepherds." But Jesus moves one step further: "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). Here is the difference that Jesus makes, marking the reason for the season of Easter! We are not alone! We have a Shepherd who knows us – intimately – even when we fail to recognize the Shepherd (Jn 10:14-18)! As persons of God-given dignity within the human family, and as the baptized, we are enfolded into this relationship.

Recently, we saw the strength and fragility of the “shepherding role” we each must play within our globalized pandemic-stricken world. We saw both heroism and utter failure on the part of official “Shepherds;” but, rescuing and nurturing by some “lead” Sheep. We understand clearly, Jesus’ is really the only way to begin to resolve the multilayered threats of the evolving forms of COVID-19. Is not “wear a mask, wash your hands, social distance,” the call of Jesus to join in “laying down his life,” through us in our day? What of joining a group focused on “anti -Black, Asian, Native, Latin/x (and more) – racisms, seeking conversion to anti-racist attitudes, behaviors, and social/political changes? Or, living sustainably, for the life of our Sister, Mother Earth?

In our privileged democratic U.S. society, each of the baptized has a role of “Prophet, Priest, and King,” and “sheep and shepherd.” Or, as Pope Francis put it:

“Each person quite spontaneously perceives a duty to accompany and help his or her neighbor. In places where these community values are maintained, people experience a closeness marked by gratitude, solidarity, and reciprocity. The neighborhood gives them a sense of shared identity” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 152).

“I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (Jn. 10:11).

Sr. Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D. is The Erica and Harry John Family Professor of Catholic Theological Ethics at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, IL.