

The Second Sunday of Epiphany

January 20, 2008

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Basically, there are two ways to herd sheep.

And just how do you know that, you may ask.

Well, we lived in Germany for a while many years ago, in a mostly rural area in the southwest, in the hills close to the border with France. The village, complete with a picturesque ruined castle on the hill, narrow winding streets, and a village square was nestled in a valley at the foot of steep, wooded hills. The valley opened on to a plain filled with farms. Places like that change slowly and painfully; in some ways we were living in a time capsule of many years ago. Some of the farming methods and machinery were pretty modern, but a lot of the past was still to be seen. We would encounter wagons pulled by massive draft horses as often as we would encounter tractors and wagons. Livestock was everywhere, pigs, cattle, and sheep, lots and lots of sheep.

There were what I took to be huge flocks of sheep on the farms; they also were the living lawn mowers of the region, often in the center of town or moving through the street. Caution was essential when driving.

Sitting in a car, waiting for a flock of sheep to clear the road, a task at which they never hurried no matter what your schedule might be, one can observe a great deal about sheep herding. One can also observe that, except for moments of great crisis, being a shepherd is a really low-stress job.

And now I imagine you're thinking, "I wonder when he'll get to the point, assuming he has one." It's this: the first way to herd sheep, the one we all envision is to have a dog, a small, hyperactive, yapping dog that constantly circles the flock and keeps them in line. The dog can move the sheep along; it can chase down the sheep that wander away from the flock and make them run back to huddle together in the safety of the crowd. How can the dog do all that? Because the sheep are scared to death. The dog drives the sheep by threats of terrible consequences if they stray or disobey. That's herding method number one.

The other way is the bell-sheep. It was really common to see one sheep wearing a bell around its neck at the head of a flock leading the way. As far as I could see, it looked just like all the other sheep, a sheep among sheep, not distinguishable in any way except by what it did. It didn't drive; it led by a calm example, showing the other sheep where to go by going there before them, finding the green pastures and the cool waters.

John the Baptist proclaims Jesus to be "the lamb of God." Lambs were very important in the time of John and Jesus. Of course, we don't often see lambs in person but, to our mind, a lamb is a soft, cute, wooly, white creature to be cuddled. Not so with John and Jesus; lambs were for sacrifice in the Temple. Lambs were gifts to God, the life of one creature as ransom for another from sin. It was an everyday practice that probably recalled the tradition of a scapegoat, a goat on which everyone's sins were placed and then driven out of town to take its chances in the desert. With it went all the people's sins. It's the same idea.

John also says that Jesus, the lamb, will take away the “Sin of the World.” Notice John says “sin” not “sins.” There was, and is, just one great, all-pervading sin, “Self-Will.” The great sin is preferring my way to God’s way, putting myself in His place, being unconcerned about anyone else or the greater good. It’s straying from the flock and going it alone. It’s the antithesis of sacrifice.

Jesus is God’s lamb, the lamb that God gives as sacrifice for His people. Jesus will go to the cross in perfect obedience to the will of God, and therein lies God’s great love for us all. You see, God could if he chose, and there are those who say that it is His choice, drive us all into being an obedient flock, siccing the dogs on us when we stray. That’s not His choice, and it doesn’t work very well anyway.

The lamb of God is the bell-sheep, the leader who goes before the flock, showing the path to be traveled to the security and comfort of the presence of God.

In His Holy Name.