

Sunday April 13, 2008 John 10:1-10

Growing up, I always thought it would be cool to have a sheep. I thought sheep were cute and fluffy, and soft. So every once and a while, I would ask my mom, "Can we get a sheep?" And my mother would always have the same response, "No, Sheep are dumb." I always thought, "What's wrong with dumb when they're so cute?"

Somehow, though I wore my mother down... so much so that when... my younger brother asked for a goat for a 4-H project, guess what? He got a goat! And then some time later when my youngest sister wanted a horse, she ended up with a horse. And what did I end up with? A lousy fish tank! You know what though, a fish tank is a heck of a lot easier to take care of than goats, horses, and sheep!

As I began to prepare for this sermon and to read the lessons for this week, ones that are so rich with images of sheep and shepherds -- I began to wonder if my mother's was right-- about sheep being dumb.

So with that question, I went to the fountain of knowledge and these days that is not the huge set of encyclopedias we have lining our bookshelves, the fountain of knowledge that we go to these days is of course...**the Internet**. So, on Wednesday, I Googled, "Are sheep dumb?" What I got was 1 million 610 thousand hits that string of words.

What I found was a plethora of websites and information, most of them trying to perpetuate the idea that "Sheep are dumb."

The first thing that I clicked on was a you-tube video that showed four sheep running through a gate the first three successfully navigate through the opening, but the last sheep as he got to the gate jumped and flew into the wall and bounced back, harmlessly into the pen

There were also a number websites found that had "dumb" sheep jokes. Jokes like,

"Two dumb sheep are walking on the grasslands. Suddenly they both fall into a hole. They can't get out. The first dumb sheep starts to shout: "Help!! Help!" It does not seem to work. No help is coming. The first dumb sheep shouts again: "Help!!! Help!" The

second dumb sheep says: "It might help if we shout "together."
The first dumb sheep shouts: "Together!! Together!!""¹

And believe it not my Internet search also uncovered a number of sermons on sheep being dumb, which is where I found this sermon. Of course, I'm only kidding!

Anyway, I did finally find some people who were willing to say that sheep showed aptitude for intelligence. One of those people was Keith Kendrick, a behavioral scientist who was able to train sheep to recognize the faces of other sheep. In fact, Kendrick trained twenty sheep to recognize the faces of 50 different sheep. Not only was he able to do this, but also he found out that the sheep were able to retain this information for more than two years. What the article failed to say was how long it took Kendrick to train those twenty sheep.

From his study, Kendrick theorized that sheep have "very sophisticated memory systems"² which he says is a characteristic of intelligence.

¹ <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/9609/jokesjs.html#Dumb>

² <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/UK/11/07/uk.science.sheep.reut/index.html>

Later on in the article, Kendrick also explains how he thinks sheep got their bad “rap” about being dumb. He believes people think sheep are dumb because sheep “lack individuality” and tend to be easily frightened.

However, Kendrick also points out that most animals, including humans, when frightened don’t always act intelligently. Anyone who’s ever seen a horror movie can testify to how “dumb” people act when their frightened.

Maybe, just maybe sheep are not dumb after all; maybe they’re just a little bit “misunderstood.”

One thing that you might be interested to know about sheep and shepherding in Jesus’ day is that often at night, shepherds lead their flocks into these rather large enclosures, pens, where the sheep would be safe. Often in these enclosures-there might be multiple flocks of sheep. At night, the shepherds would then pay a guard or “gatekeeper” to keep watch over the assembled flocks in the pen. Then in the morning, the shepherds would return to call their flocks out of the pen so that they might lead them back out to the pasture to graze or down to the waters edge to drink.

Sheep had to learn to become adept at recognizing and listening for their shepherd's voice among the many competing voices.

Sheep had to have the capacity to distinguish their shepherd's voice from all other voices that they might be calling them out the pen.

Now maybe, just maybe it's not sheep that are dumb after all?

Maybe, it's us, human beings who aren't the most intelligent creatures.

Perhaps it's not some much that we aren't intelligent, but that we tend to be easily distracted.

Distracted by the many voices that compete for our attention. I don't think we are quite as adept sheep at filtering out all the competing voices, we tend to be easily led astray, and often we follow wrong shepherd out of the pen.

Perhaps, we need to find ways to dial back those voices that distract us from hearing the voice of the shepherd, find ways to

filter out the voices that compete with the voice of our shepherd, that try to talk over the shepherd. Perhaps we need to work at training ourselves to listen for and hear the voice of the shepherd. Because when we do hear the shepherd's voice and we do follow it is,

A voice that will lead us to a place where will find lush green pastures waiting for us, just ripe for our grazing,

It is a voice that will lead us beside still waters, waters that will quench our deepest thirsts and needs.

It is a voice that will revive our souls and bring meaning and value into our lives.

It is the voice of a shepherd who will walk with us, as we walk through that most frightening place, the valley of the shadow of death, and we will fear no evil because the shepherd goes before us.

It is the voice of a shepherd who offers us the eternal assurance that in our following--- we will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.

Perhaps the questions before us today are... what voices are you and I are following... and where are those voices leading us?

Amen.