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The Gospel according to Mother Goose

Jeremiah 23:3-4 & Mark 6:34

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 22, 2012 by Dr. Christy Lohr Sapp

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Since becoming a mother several months ago, I have become reacquainted with nursery rhymes and children's books. Sure, I had heard many of them before – when I was a kid and back in my babysitting days – but now they are becoming embedded in my memory – in my psyche, almost – in a way that can be disturbing. They cycle through my mind as I try to fall asleep at night. I catch myself singing them as I walk to work. And worst of all, I critique them stylistically, socially and theologically. Take the “Runaway Bunny”, for example; this story is about a mother rabbit whose son devises myriad scenarios to runaway and hide from her. With each new scheme, she responds with the way she will follow him or remain by his side. Many interpret this modern classic as a testimony to a parent's inescapable, unending love. I can't help but see it as a book about a mother with serious separation-anxiety issues, though. And, then there is “Ten Little Fingers and Ten Little Toes”. In rhyming verse, this book is meant to be a multi-cultural affirmation of a common trait, fingers and toes, that all children around the world share, but it suggests a physical normativity that is problematic for me. I have a friend who is missing all five fingers on one hand, and I cringe at the thought of reading this book around him, because it is not having “ten little fingers and ten little toes” that connects people across cultures. Instead, it is our place as beloved children of God that binds us together. (But, admittedly, perhaps I over think these things.)

Little Bo Peep is another one I have thought about too much. You know it: *Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and she doesn't know where to find them. Leave them alone and they will come home, wagging their tails behind them.* Clearly Little Bo Peep doesn't know a lot about sheep-herding. Sheep are not creatures that are known for their survival skills or resourcefulness. Shepherds do not just leave their sheep alone. Sheep are not regarded as the brightest of God's creatures. They are slow and dim-witted. They frighten easily. They stray and get lost. A sheep is not good at finding his way back to where he belongs like a homing pigeon or a dog is; if Little Bo Peep were to leave the lost sheep to their own devices, chances are they would not come home wagging their tails behind them. Instead, they would probably end up as some wolf's dinner.

Bruno Bettelheim was a child psychologist who criticized children's literature that did not help young people create meaning in their lives. Bettelheim lifted up fairy tales and sacred stories from a variety of cultures and traditions as important teachers for children about problem-solving in the face of life's challenges. These stories instruct children on ways to behave in the world and encourage them to assume leadership roles. Fairy tales offer important existential life lessons about facing difficulty and overcoming it, about victory in the midst of adversity, about good versus evil, and about finding one's place in the world and claiming it. “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “Hansel & Gretel”, for example, both teach that even the smallest, weakest person can best a hoarding giant or a wicked witch. Bettelheim also lifts up fairy tales as a means of conveying ethical, moral and religious themes to children. We provide children with role models and characters they can relate to when we steep them in stories with consequences.

Bettelheim's work made me think about Little Bo Peep and what it conveys. And, not only do I think that Little Bo Peep exhibits questionable sheep-herding skills, but I also think this rhyme teaches a suspect work ethic and a questionable theology. "Leave them alone, and they will come home" sounds like an excuse not to finish the job. Is Little Bo Peep not expected to see her work through to the end? Does the rhyme imply that when the task gets tough it is ok to quit? Where is the sense of responsibility and follow through? Is this a type of leadership that children should learn?

Theologically speaking, "leave them alone" is passive and uninvolved.<sup>1</sup> Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and rather than searching high and low for them as the shepherd does in the parable of the lost sheep, she leaves them to their own devices. This is a hands-off approach to the lost. Sheep without a shepherd are a sorry bunch. They are defenseless and need someone to look after them. They need an active and engaged shepherd. One who will protect them. One who will stay with them, search them out, bring them in, and welcome them home.

Thankfully, such a theology is **not** what we find in today's readings. The prophet Jeremiah describes a God who is quite the opposite kind of shepherd from Little Bo Peep; this is one who is intimately engaged in tending the flock. This engagement comes in two forms.

First, Jeremiah writes that God will seek out the sheep who have been scattered and left unattended: *Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock ... and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.* This is a strong statement of personal responsibility and involvement. Our God does not demonstrate a Little Bo Peep theology that leaves the weary and the frightened to their own devices. Rather, God gets involved. God is active, gathering the remnant and bringing them back into the fold. God is sustaining, returning the flock to places where it can flourish, thrive and be fruitful. God is compassionate, taking on human form so that he can share humanity's suffering. As sheep under the watchful eye of a loving God, we are not left forgotten and alone in the cold dark night. We are not exiled strangers driven out of our herds and left with no sense of belonging. Instead, God seeks us out, joins us in our pain and calls us home. We are not left without a shepherd because, ultimately, we fall under the protective care of the Good Shepherd.

Today's gospel reading reiterates this point. After a whirlwind tour of teaching, preaching and healing, Jesus and the apostles are tired and depressed. Jesus' cousin was just killed. The group is overworked and overwhelmed, and they need to regroup and recharge. So, Jesus tells them to take a break, to go away to a wilderness retreat. Only they can't. Crowds are pursuing them, and they just cannot get a break from the people's relentless demands. The crowds have spoiled the apostles' quiet retreat and the "deserted place" is no longer so deserted. It is suddenly overpopulated and teeming with people who are needy, people demanding attention, people who just won't leave them alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Hoefler compares the Jewish authorities' approach to sinners (tax collectors, the lame, etc.) to Little Bo Peep in And He Told Them a Story, (C.S. S. Publishing: Lima) p 91.

How would you respond if you were one of the apostles? It would be so tempting, wouldn't it, to be like Little Bo Peep and just leave the crowds alone. To become self-protective and say, "Hey, I need a rest. I've worked hard. I deserve it." Little Bo Peep is ill-prepared to go out in search of her sheep just as the apostles are ill-prepared to engage the crowds because they have no more to give. Caring for the needs of others can be exhausting, and it can come at a huge cost. But "leaving them alone" is not what happens in this gospel lesson. Instead, Jesus has *compassion* for the great crowd *because they are like sheep without a shepherd*.

There it is again – that actively involved, engaged style of shepherding. Jesus recognizes the desperate need of the people around him and tends to them. He has *compassion* for them because they are like sheep without a shepherd.

The word, *compassion*, offers incredible insight into the type of leadership that Jesus demonstrates. Compassion comes from the Latin prefix "com" which means "with" and the root "pati" which means "to suffer". To have compassion, then, means to *suffer with* someone. This is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Jesus embodies taking on suffering alongside the afflicted. He embraces it, endures it and overcomes it. He does not leave the people alone to work out their suffering independently; instead he teaches them about the love of God; he feeds them spiritually and physically; he heals them physically and emotionally, and he calms their fears. This is exactly the opposite type of shepherding that Bo Peep embodies. With the compassion of Christ, we know the love of God.

Can you see yourself in this story? If not as an apostle, then as a member of the crowd? Have you ever felt like a sheep without a shepherd? Perhaps you have struggled with an illness that you just cannot overcome despite a healthy diet and a positive attitude and you feel like you have exhausted your options for medical solutions and have exhausted the friends and family supporting you. Perhaps an important relationship in your life has ended and you are looking to restore your trust and faith in love. Perhaps you have lost someone special to you and you are wondering whether you will ever know true companionship again. Or (and this might be the most implausible scenario to imagine) perhaps you have recently said goodbye to a dean who you saw as a good shepherd and you feel as if your faith is crumbling and you are wondering what is coming next for the community you love.

This is where Jeremiah's second assurance of God's involvement with the flock gives us renewed hope. God says: *I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing.*

As if the careful tending of the Good Shepherd were not enough, our scripture promises even more. The good news is that we belong to a God who has compassion on us and is *faithful* to us. As a Good Shepherd who does not shirk responsibility, God provides for our needs by raising up other shepherds from among us. (That is a little 's'.) God desires our thriving and flourishing, and in the activity of caring for us, God is constantly preparing new leaders to guide us throughout the journey. While the ultimate, big 'S', shepherd has come in the form of Jesus, God's only son, there is still a place for others to lead, too. We see this in the life of Jesus who gathered those around him who would share his message, teach his good news and help to care for

his flock. God does the same today and throughout history in molding and shaping those who will guide his people.

There are times when this prospect might seem scarier than being without a shepherd. After all, who are we to lead? The apostles were worn down and wearied by their work with Jesus, and why would our experiences of shepherding be any different? But, time and time again, we are reminded that we can do great things with the help of God who calls us. That is what time-honored fairy tales like “Jack the Giant Killer” and religious stories like David and Goliath teach us. Even the weak can be made strong, and even the lowly can be made great. We only have to trust that God is there with us, guiding us, leading us all the way. We only have to quiet our own fears and anxieties long enough to know that our suffering is not born in solitude; we have a compassionate savior who guides us along the way.

So, while at times we might feel like sheep who are helpless and afraid, we don't need to stand around simply baaaaaa-ing and wondering what to do and where to go while waiting for direction. It is not that we do not need a Shepherd; that we most certainly do. But, the savior has come. He leads us on and he prods us to live into the future that God is preparing for us. To that end, God will raise up additional shepherds to walk with us, and one of those shepherds might just be you. Maybe at times you are more like a sheep dog who helps to herd the flock and chase away predators. Or, maybe at other times you are a like hired hand who helps when the shepherd needs it. Either way, you are co-shepherding; following in the path of one who is compassionate and responding to the loving voice that calls us all home.

In the midst of uncertainty and anger, how is God calling you to help tend his flock?  
In the midst of disparity and deprivation, how is God raising you up?  
In the midst of loss and grief, how are you, too, a good shepherd?