

Text: John 10: 11-21
Title: *Ego Eimi* ~ Again and Again
Date: 05.03.09
Roger Allen Nelson

I have a friend who is a therapist.
I have a therapist who is a friend.

Dr. David Olsen is the executive director of the Samaritan Counseling Center ~ housed in an old white house perched on the banks of the mighty Mohawk River in upstate New York. David's office is a nondescript space of book shelves, couches, a picture or two of his lovely wife, and the usual clutter of running shoes and workout gear. He is a pastor, and an author, and an athlete, and a reader, and a father, and a mystic, and a friend, and a therapist....

David spends the better part of most days, with his legs crossed and a grande cup of Starbucks in his hand, listening to people. He probes, prods, presses, and patiently helps people listen to their own lives. He has a remarkable gift for asking questions that open up new ways of seeing, thinking, connecting, healing, moving...

David told me recently that there is a something of a baseline anxiety in contemporary American life. Most everybody knows some manner of anxiety; it is part of the psycho-social norm. We're anxious about death, impermanence, loneliness, meaning....

But, lately in his counseling practice David has seen a rise in that anxiety baseline. Chronic anxiety has spiked to acute anxiety and often overwhelmed people revert to what David called "primitive responses." There is a certain fight or flight instinct. He is seeing more strained relationships, alcohol abuse, destructive health patterns, panicked irrational behavior, entrenched fundamentalist impulses, and 40 year olds that reconnect with old lovers on Facebook and get all turned around in some sort of flight of fantasy.....

Maybe that's not new news. Rising anxiety is the moment's zeitgeist. To read what's left of the daily newspaper industry, it can feel like the floorboards are cracking, the roof is leaking, and the very foundation is shaking.

You know the litany: Jobs aren't secure, pensions have eroded, health care costs are overwhelming, assets are toxic, the economy is in free fall, and the only thing moving faster is the rise of the federal deficit. We're slogged down in two wars, banks are failing and we're bailing ~ with borrowed bazillions. At every turn conservatives squawk "socialism" and the threat to freedom, while liberals crow that we've lost our moorings when torture is acceptable. Climate change, energy demands, pollution, swine flu, carcinogens in Crestwood's drinking water! There is a round-the-clock-chicken-little-racket that the sky is falling...

But, truth be told, I'm anxious.

In the middle of the night I toss and turn with worries about aging and Alzheimer's, the rising demand for limited resources, the national debt, the economy and ecology in which our children will live, and what I'll do when I run dry as a preacher. Or, on some particularly dark nights I join Martin Luther who said, "I more fear what is within me than what comes from without." So, while I may not show it on the surface, I certainly know what it means to be anxious.

Maybe you do too?

For while there may be a cultural anxiety baseline, what makes each of us anxious is a remarkably personal phenomenon. You may not be anxious at all....

But, I know that some of you worry in the middle of the night. Some of you are anxious about that thing that keeps casting a shadow in your life. Some of you are anxious about what comes next, or what could be lost, or what you don't think you can carry one more step.

Dear friends, the relationship between anxiety and faith is familiar preaching territory ~ maybe too familiar ~ but I invite you to consider this text as one more layer of that landscape.

Now, the standard sermon about the Good Shepherd is that Jesus cares for every lamb in his flock and as he picks us up and carries us close he calms our anxiety with a peace that passes all understanding. And, I would do nothing to diminish that ~ in fact, I hope that is part of your experience.

But, it limits the gospel to a kind of personal spiritual salve and it boils down the shepherding of God to something that we feel, and I wonder if there is some other word here...

What if we come at it this way?

The Gospel of John is the last gospel written. It is no simple retelling of the story of Jesus. John puts more words on Jesus' lips, piles up longer sermons, and points to more signs or symbols Jesus' identity than the other gospels. Part of what he is working at is a more developed and nuanced theology. As the early church is coming to understand the "who, what, and why" of Jesus, John's gospel bears a powerful shaping witness.

So, laced throughout John's gospel are seven "I am" statements and they carry substantial freight. In Greek they read: *ego eimi*. That is not a typical construction; it has an emphatic quality. Some scholars suggest it had the sense of the speech of a deity ~ like a thundering whisper that causes the foundations to shudder and the rafters to shake. They are not simple statements dropped in the middle of conversation, but they intentionally echo the "I AM" of Hebrew scripture. They resonant with the voice of God who said to Abraham:

*I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites:
"I AM has sent me you."*

The “I am” statements in John mesh the mission of Jesus with God’s work in creating and covenanting. “I am” picks up the divine moniker and points to God and Jesus as coequal, coeternal, co-substantial, co-essence, coefficient... ;-) co-God!

Now, a shepherd would be a familiar image for all ancient people and it connects notions of rule and ownership with care, belonging, leading, and comfort. It would be a familiar image for the Hebrews. Moses and David were imagined as shepherds of the sheep of God. The psalmists and the prophets picture God as a shepherd or as providing a shepherd. For example in Ezekiel:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them... I will rescue them from all the places they were scattered on the day of clouds and darkness... I will bring them out and gather them... There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture... I myself will tend my sheep... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays; I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...

You get the idea.

So, while the phrase “personal savior” isn’t in the Bible, the image of God/Jesus as a shepherd illumines that sort of idea.

In a hard scramble rocky terrain,
in a brutal wilderness where wolves abound,
in world where things go bump in the night,
even in the valley of the shadow of death,
God as shepherd gathers, saves, feeds, protects, leads, and guides, “along the way, for if you lead me I cannot stray.”

And! Whether we feel like we’re in the fold or not,
whether we feel like our kids are in the fold or not,
whether we’re running away or lost in a thicket,
whether we’re tied up in anxious knots, or
whether it soothes our doubts and calms our fears....

for John, “I am the Good Shepherd” has the quality of proclamation.

It stands as truth ~ a profound and powerful mystery that is bigger than us.

It may be apocryphal, but Karl Barth is to have said "there is no such thing as an individual Christian." Sort of like, there is no separate singular form of the word for sheep. The shepherding of God isn't a personal, me-and-Jesus relationship, but it is always done in the context of a community, of a flock....

On Thursday night, Joe Huizenga ~ a member with Octavia and little Stevie of this hopeful flock of sheep ~ was examined by the local Christian Reformed churches in order to be eligible to accept a call as the pastor of Roseland Christian Reformed Church. It was a fine fine night.

Except, Joe was apprehensive, much of the questioning was awkward, and a lot of his charisma and clarity got muted in the process. But, one theme kept coming back. Joe kept trying to get the questioners to understand that he learned as much about the Good Shepherd from the other sheep, from recovering crack addicts and the hookers out in front of the hourly motel who think of Roseland CRC as their church, as they did from him. Joe learned of the ways of Good Shepherd from them even as they did from him.

Somehow, he knew deep in his bones that the shepherding of God is not private, but that we are part of a sheepfold, learning from and leaning on one another, even as wolves lurk in the dark....

And, what are those wolves?

What if the wolves are those things that keep us from deep trust?

Private faith,
cheap quick religious confidence...
self absorption, self reliance, self confidence,
numbed and dulled by the anxious pace of life,
confidence in consumption and capitalism...

Dear friends,

Dear people of his pasture,

Dear sheep of his fold,

“I AM, the Good Shepherd” lays down his life for his sheep.

That is an odd turn of phrase. Not expected. Bleating sheep would not do well on their own if a shepherd was dead. There is a sort of flawed logic to the image.

Except...

Except that John is pointing to and framing the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

I AM lays down his life.
I AM raises up his life.
I AM does it by his own volition

I AM goes to and through the darkest places to gather, protect, and save his sheep.

And, therefore there is nothing to anxious about...

For, no matter what happens, again and again we will proclaim “I AM.”
Again and again, we will gather, come hell or high water, and proclaim “I AM.”
Again and again, even when we bleat and stray and wander away, the proclamation of “I AM” will resound, and its truth will stand and comfort, and we will live under that truth as community. From anxiety to community.

For finally the gospel truth is that Jesus is our Shepherd. We are loved, we belong, we are safe. May we live not out of anxiety but out of that deep trust. May we follow the voice of shepherd not out of anxiety but out of deep gratitude.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.