

After the Chauvin verdict, can we have good shepherds? Bellaimey, St. John's, 4 Easter 2021

The story was powerful enough that 5,000 men signed up. Probably some women and children, too. Powerful enough that the police were called and Peter and John were arrested. They got a hearing the next morning, with another big crowd, and the charges were read: *you two were telling lies yesterday, about somebody actually coming back from the dead. And you used some kind of black magic to heal this poor man's legs.*

But it wasn't magic, Peter told the court. That beggar, he thought we were going to give him money, but we don't have any. But we do have something else that's more precious. So I took his hand and told him he could stand up. I didn't know it would happen, but the Master told us it could, if we would just say his name. Peter went on, there isn't any other name that does it. It's not black magic. I don't know how it works, but he told us it would. Say his name. So we do.

Peter is right: we do have something precious. Faith. Hope. Love. Not mere optimism, but a story we tell, over and over, a story we live in: *if we are like sheep, grazing and sleeping and wandering around with our heads down, we aren't scared because there is a shepherd watching over us. If we are like robots, executing our routines, we still have the capacity for an upgrade, because the programmer wants us to understand more. If we are blind to the suffering of others, and then somehow we start to see it, we need not merely feel sorry for them.*

On Tuesday, after everyone had hurried home, at Breck School, where I teach religion, some of us stayed and watched the Derek Chauvin verdict in the library. We waited a long time, half-listening to lawyers filling time, glancing at their monitors to see when the judge would appear. Finally, he did, and he read with no drama the letter from the jury: three declarations straight out of a law book. *Guilty. Guilty. Guilty.* And then, in a litany of unanimity, the twelve jurors did the same.

It was not a miracle. It ought to have been a foregone conclusion. Anyone who watched the video, who saw the icy entitlement in Chauvin's face, would know that he killed Mr. George Floyd. On camera. With fifty eyewitnesses. But Mr. Ellison, the attorney general, and his host of prosecutors, knew the truth: in America, police can kill a black person. They can almost always kill a white person. They can do whatever they want. So it took 14 excellent lawyers, *a team of Michael Jordans*, Ellison said. An unlimited budget, because the State could not afford to lose this time. The chances of winning are so remote that prosecutors usually don't bother bringing charges.

Religion is a story people live in. It's a big enough story, a story that can make us shake with sobbing, like my wife did when she heard the verdict. Like Thomas did when he put his hands into Jesus' wounds. Like Mary Magdalene did when the gardener turned out to be her resurrected teacher.

Today, we hear Peter's story: *we were scared they were coming to crucify us, too, and we hid. They hung him up there on that post and laughed at him being some kind of king.*

We hear David's story in Psalm 23: *I was once a shepherd boy, but now that I'm grown, I think of God like my shepherd, keeping me safe in the dark valley, chasing away my enemies.*

And John's story, in the other two readings: *nobody ever loved me like Jesus did. Loved everyone, really. He's like a good shepherd--the best--not like someone just watching the sheep for a wage. He laid down his life for us, his friends. We're his flock. He died because of our sins: we humans use violence to keep order.*

Our church has decided that we are not just going to be storytellers, though. Not this year. It's not enough to tell the Christmas story as an allegory of God smashing a human ladder of privilege. Not enough to say that God loves the poor or the oppressed. It's not enough to be happy that Jesus was only dead for a few days, and that the Jewish story in those days was incorrect, that resurrection would

only come at the end of time. It's not enough to get goosebumps when we sing that one verse of that song, and Chad plays just the right bit of piano to make us sing even louder.

We've decided that our generation is being asked to stand up, by history, by the Holy Spirit, and by our own self-respect. To not look away. To vote and to help people vote who might find voting hard. To march, even timidly and with a sign we made ourselves. To boycott. To bring food to protesters. To rethink how we spend our money. To tell others why we are getting so worked up about politics. To step aside and let younger people take the lead. To find out what people of color, and women, and GLBTQ people need from us, rather than telling them. Or not even seeing them.

This may not be a recipe for church growth, but we are pretty sure it is the recipe we have to follow.

Once upon a time, the story of a heroic shepherd laying down their life for others inspired people. Not so much now, for us city people. Our job is to tell that story in 21st century fashion, by living it.

- If you have some sheep in your life, and you shepherd them, what makes you so sure that sheep over there is not also yours?
- If you have some pasture, how are you sharing it?
- If you're a regular sheep, grazing away all day, and some voice tells everybody that God helps those who help themselves, or that those poor sheep over there deserve the bad stuff happening to them, when some voice promotes selfishness or thanks God for making us this way and not *that way*, it's time to look up from your grazing and see whose voice it is, because it doesn't sound like our good old shepherd.

Is there nothing of the shepherd in Officer Chauvin? Only the wolf? Minneapolis needs a lot more shepherds working public safety, even if we comfortable sheep in these green zipcodes don't know it. Even if we never see the predatory side of the police. We are learning to believe the stories our neighbors of color tell about fearing that sons will not come home; or fearing to call for help, because it might bring guns blazing. We are imagining a different sort of police, a fresh start that shares no DNA with posses hunting down escaped slaves, or goons beating up immigrants or striking workers, or thugs driving people out of redlined neighborhoods and perhaps, at night, donning KKK robes. We're working for a police department that reflects the story we tell in this stone building with a red door on the corner: *we follow a good shepherd, who laid down his life for his friends. We count all human beings among those friends. We know that violence, especially the kind wielded by the powerful, must not have the last word, and that at least it did not have the last word with Jesus. He is our hero, our role model, our storyteller, our daily bread, our heart and soul.*

We don't know who the police will kill next. Or what law will weaken our democracy. But to mix metaphors, our good shepherd is like our headlights. To paraphrase E.L. Doctorow: we are like travelers at night, in a car: we can only see as far as the headlights, but we can make the whole journey that way.