

“Extending Hope in the Family of Christ”

Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

John 10:11-18

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Eight years ago I left the United States to write stories for Church World Service in East Africa as a Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteer. This is the same Church World Service that Pat Naujoks has been promoting for the Crop Hunger Walk next weekend.

One of the most inspiring communities that I have ever encountered is the Pokot people of Western Kenya. I spent a lot of time in the region of West Pokot because of the great vulnerability that Climate Change has brought to the region as rainfall has all but ceased over the last 20 years. It is a dry desert region inhabited by millions of people who rely heavily on livestock for their livelihoods. It is a desert, but there is still plant life, beautiful wild birds, and a great diversity of wild animals that thrive in their desert habitat.

Many of the communities that live in this region adapted to a pastoral lifestyle. They care for goats, cows and camels that can travel across great distances in search of water and food depending on the seasonal rains. Most people do not necessarily own land, but instead have a reciprocal and communal relationship to the land. It is a shared resource that each family in their community must preserve and maintain in order to survive.

Without land, the animals themselves become their sole possessions - their source of wealth, their source of food, their source of trade, and their source of relational bonds for marriage and politics. They might own these animals, but it is the animals that sustain and provide for the family’s existence. The people are inextricably linked to their animals. The herd is an extension of the family unit.

So when Jesus says “I am the Good Shepherd,” the people of West Pokot know exactly what he is talking about. They know what it is to be the shepherd whose life is deeply intertwined with the lives of the herd. They too could say, “I know my own and my own know me.” Each of the goats and sheep had their own personality and capabilities. If a predator were to show up to prey on the flock, the shepherd would spring into action - defending every last animal - as each of them were an extension of the family.

The Pokot village of Chepakuul worked together with Church World Service to build a sand dam that stores drinking water safely underground in their community and a shallow well to be able to extract that water.

Chepetoiyo was the first female chairperson for her community water committee. Her committee organized the village to camp out on the banks of their small river to bring water, stones and sand to the site for construction of the sand dam. Chepetoiyo worked hard to change the lives of people in her community. This is what she said in a speech during our visit in 2010. “We used to go very far far far away to fetch water - maybe 10 kilometers. By the time we reached our home we were so tired from carrying the jug, you don’t know what to do next.” She would go release the goats, and her son would release the cows from the pasture. She couldn’t send her children to school because they spent all their time finding water.

She said, “When we got this well, it was like God came here to our village.” Water borne illness was stamped out, education became available to boys and girls of all ages, and new economic opportunities began to emerge!

Hundreds of stories like this sprung from this region because of the work of Deborah Katina. Before I ever visited her, I heard the epic tales of how Deborah first encountered the Church World Service staff while traveling the desert on foot to educate girls about women’s health issues. Her laugh was contagious and her impassioned speech had persuaded many village leaders to empower the voices of women and girls. She is my hero.

She had returned from college many years ago with her friends to realize they were some of the only women in the region to have an education. They started a community organization to provide stability to entire villages in order to remove the barriers that kept women from excelling.

She came to see each person in her community as an extension of her family. She saw value in each person, each child, each woman - and she was willing to do whatever it took to empower a vibrant life for each of them.

Water became the key to gaining influence for women’s rights. Because of the impact of climate change, the traditional watering holes were no longer providing enough water for the entire community. New technologies like the sand dam provided a renewable source of water that removed some of the stress of climate change and gave Deborah some leverage to improve the lives of women in the community. In order to be an advocate for women, Deborah became a shepherd for all.

What does it mean to us that Jesus claims the identity of shepherd? In this identity, Jesus claims that his disciples are an extension of his divine family, but he also claims, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” I think we can claim our identity in these “other sheep” - as can most Christians in the world. We are the sheep of another fold that are still loved, healed and protected by Jesus just like the rest of the family.

“Extending Hope in the Family of Christ”

Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

In our scripture reading from the book of Acts, we see how Peter responds to being part of the flock that Jesus is willing to lay down his life for. Peter responds by healing the sick in Jesus' name and refusing to shut up about it - even under the threat of the council in Jerusalem. In this time after Jesus' resurrection, when the Holy Spirit was with them, Peter took risks to make sure that the Love and healing Grace of Jesus Christ was made available to people of every fold - even the most vulnerable outcast - even those in power who had participated in Jesus' execution - even when those same powerful men hoped to crush him as well.

On this Earth Day, it is important for us to reflect on how we respond to Jesus as our Good Shepherd. The love and healing grace that Peter shared in the temple is what God calls us to share in our world. Jesus loves all people on the earth, so as part of Jesus' flock, we are called to be lovers and healers of the earth.

In an age of climate change, it can be overwhelming to consider the ways we participate in the growing climate crisis with our own consumption of fossil fuels. While we can work to plant our own trees, install our own solar panels and reduce our consumption of fossil fuels as part of our earth healing work, it is important for us to extend our influence into the systems that have pushed us toward this climate crisis. Like Deborah Katina, who brought hope to her entire community through water so that she could improve the lives of women, we too can bring hope to our society in order to protect the future of our earth and all people - especially the most vulnerable.

We can bring hope to our governments and the corporations that serve us to inspire actions that reduce our dependence on fossil fuels as a nation and global society. Just as the Good Shepherd would risk their life to chase after every last sheep in the flock, we can participate in the Body of Christ by seeking to protect the most vulnerable among us - who are at greatest risk of suffering from climate change.

We must see our global neighbors as an extension of our own family - just as Jesus sees us as an extension of God's self in the world - God's children - God's family.

Let us refuse to stop healing the earth in Jesus name!
Amen