

Easter 4A, May 15, 2011
The Rev. Stephen D. Crippen
John 10:1-10

Jon Katz is a writer who was originally known for his crime novels, but more recently has written several nonfiction accounts of his life with dogs. One of his dog books is called, “The Dogs of Bedlam Farm: An Adventure with Sixteen Sheep, Three Dogs, Two Donkeys, and Me.” In this book he recounts his decision to move from suburban New Jersey—which for him was a fairly underwhelming corner of the world—to a farm in upstate New York. This move was inspired by his troubled border collie, Orson: it was through Orson that Jon Katz first came to know the world of shepherding, dog training, and the joys, sorrows, and challenges of rural life with animals. It was Orson who lit a fire within his human companion, a fire that could only be dealt with in the harsh yet beautiful setting of an upstate farm.

In his first year as an amateur farmer, Katz tells wrenching stories of wintertime woe: a sheep is having trouble giving birth in the middle of the night, so it’s Jon’s task to reach up inside her to rescue the lamb. A donkey named Carol develops a mysterious illness, requiring him to keep vigil with her in the freezing barn. A dog’s behavioral problems require extensive training, and lead to brutal episodes of frustration, rage, and even despair for a new farmer trying to keep everyone safe, warm, and fed.

It’s a great tale for anyone who wonders what might come out of them, or transform them, if they choose to take on a life-changing task.

And I think my favorite story from “Bedlam Farm” is the one about Orson, the sheep, and...bear with me...a pile of donkey dung. I love the story because I can so thoroughly identify with Jon Katz’s deep frustration with his dog, and (more powerfully, more centrally) with himself. Each morning, as Katz moved through the multitude of daily chores, he would take Orson out through the gate to the pasture where the sheep were grazing, so that Orson—who, let’s remember, was a sheepdog—could herd the sheep back to their pen.

But Orson had other ideas. While his so-called “master” was walking toward the sheep, Orson would break right and snack on that day’s fresh pile of donkey poop, conveniently set out for him beneath an apple tree by Carol and Fanny, the farm’s two sweet donkeys. And each day, poor Jon Katz would shout at his dog, disgusted and enraged by Orson’s behavior. He knew this was irrational: he knew that dogs do what they do. They don’t have moral agency like humans. Born scavengers, they can’t resist the high-protein, high-calorie value of animal droppings. It’s not an ethical choice; it’s just their nature. But like most humans, it was hard for Katz to remember this in the moment, and all too easy to scream at his dog, which only confused and stressed out the dog, and deepened the rage within Katz himself.

Then, one day in February, a “freezing morning...in the middle of the winter from hell,” Katz called it, he finally did something different. They went through the gate, Katz told Orson to “go get the sheep,” and Orson, true to form, disobeyed and broke right for his snack. But Katz kept quiet, and kept moving toward the sheep. He threw corn at the sheep and started getting their attention. He told himself to stay quiet. *Stay quiet*... and you know what? Orson bounded over to him and began to herd the sheep! He probably had at least some of his snack before realizing that his human companion wasn’t shouting at him, but the lack of shouting changed the dog’s behavior, and over a surprisingly short time, after about eight mornings, Orson finally gave up completely the behavior Katz didn’t want him to do.

And when he did that, Katz wrote, “I raised my arms to the sky and danced a small jig. When Orson came running over, exuberant but confused, I showered him with hugs and treats. ‘Thank you, thank you,’ I told him. ‘You have helped me to be a slightly better human than I was last week.’”

You have helped me to be a slightly better human than I was last week.

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, commonly called Good Shepherd Sunday, and so, like every year, we hear a portion of chapter 10 from John’s Gospel. The discourse on sheep and shepherds is long enough to break into three pieces, and this year we hear the beginning of the chapter. Here’s a taste: “[The shepherd] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers...” We then hear Jesus call himself the *gate*—the way through which his followers find peace, nourishment, and life. But soon after that he calls himself the Good (or, better translated, the Noble) Shepherd, the heroic figure who lays down his life for his people.

But...this is odd. Shepherds weren’t well thought of in Jesus’ day. They weren’t considered good, domestic citizens. They kept endless hours on hillsides, and did not earn good reputations. So Jesus in John chapter 10 is turning a common image on its head. If shepherds were disreputables, then Jesus is the Good Disreputable.

But what makes him Good? Why is Jesus the best—even the only—way into the pasture of life and peace?

I offer this idea: Jesus is the Gate, the Good Shepherd, because Jesus—who comes from God and returns to God—Jesus *allows his companions to influence him*. Like our friend Jon Katz (who no doubt would balk at being compared to Jesus) our Savior chooses to learn our ways, to understand us, to see the world through our eyes. If we are the dog Orson in this story, then Jesus is the One who realizes that if he wants to have a relationship with us, and in that relationship transform us, he needs to think like us, see like us, *respect* us. He needs to not shout, not give in to irritation.

This is what I think we mean when we speak of “Incarnation.”

And...this was a thorny controversy in the early Christian church. In the first few centuries after Jesus, Christians had a hard time reconciling two ideas: that God was one, and perfect, and unmovable, the Source of all Being; and that God became human: mortal, moveable, a creature. What we know as the Nicene Creed was a result of extended reflection on this dilemma. How can God, the Changeless One, *change*? How can God, the Unmovable Mover, *move*?

If Jesus is God, then why does he weep for his friends? Why is he open to persuasion when the Syro-Phoenecian woman begs for healing? Why does power involuntarily leave him when another person touches his garment? Why does he suffer just like us, and even, in some accounts of his death, cry out in despair?

Why? Well, God has already done this. Christians in that era and ours worship a God who appeared to Moses and said, “I have observed the misery of my people...I have heard their

cry...I know their sufferings...I have come down to deliver them..." God *observes* human misery, *hears* human cries, and *responds* to these problems by sending a leader to bring them out.

And Jesus himself, who so thoroughly followed God and so devoutly said Yes to the Kingdom of God—even to death on a cross—Jesus himself in his pouring out of his own life moved God to raise him. The resurrection, as we understand it, is God responding to the remarkable discipleship of Jesus. God was *moved*.

So...back to that farm in upstate New York, led by an inexperienced city boy who wanted to change, wanted to learn, wanted to be moved, wanted to find out what might happen if he took a major risk and cast his lot with a motley crew of sheep and dogs and donkeys. He noticed the skeptical glances of the seasoned farmers who encountered him at feed stores and grocery stores. He knew that his farm, which the locals called "the old Keyes place," would probably never be called "the old Katz place." He was appropriately humble, appropriately daunted by the choice he made to upend his life and learn an entirely new way of being creative, being an animal companion, being a human.

And his great insight for us, I think, is this: if you want to be a Good Shepherd, you better learn right now that you need to understand and appreciate the sheep, the dogs, the donkeys, the neighbors, the trainers, the farmhands, and everyone else who you'll encounter in your effort to make it all work, to ensure the creatures in your charge are safe, and warm, and fed.

Our Good Shepherd Jesus knows that he must know us to interact with us, understand us to change us, and be willing to be transformed himself if he wants to transform us.

And he invites us to do the same: with those we presume are in need of our help, with our colleagues and co-workers, with our spouses and children, with our friends and neighbors. This religion of ours is one of companionship, humility, and openness to the gifts and strengths of the *other*.

And so, as we go about our morning chores, can we open our hearts and minds to that strange dog who runs so eagerly where we don't want him to?

Can we see the world through his eyes?

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Work cited: Jon Katz, "The Dogs of Bedlam Farm: An Adventure with Sixteen Sheep, Three Dogs, Two Donkeys, and Me" (New York: Villard Books, 2004).