

Circling the Sheep

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

My brother's family got a new dog; a rescue dog so they don't know what kind it is. But they have hints from its behavior. It circles around under your feet whenever walking, and nips and cuts you off whenever the boys try to run. This dog definitely has some border-collie, sheep herding instincts. Shepherds have trained these instincts into border collies for centuries, because sheep are highly vulnerable to wild animals when alone. Their main defense against predators is to stay together in a tightly knit group. A sheep alone is a dead sheep, but the collie always keeps the sheep together as it moves them.

Today's Bible passage portraying Jesus as the Good Shepherd, as well as today's feast of Holy Etchmiadzin, are powerful reminders of how important it remains to stick together in our faith. When writing about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, the psalmist said, "[God] made His own people go forth like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock; and He led them on safely, so that they did not fear" (Ps. 78:52-53). I can think of no more concise way to sum up Armenian history of the last two millennia than this. "[God] made His own people go forth like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock; and He led them on safely, so that they did not fear" (Ps. 78:52-53).

How many times in Armenian history were regular people, just like you and I, attacked and scattered from their homes and livelihoods by foreign invaders? How many times was Etchmiadzin, the Vatican City of our faith, threatened and relocated somewhere else because of the same foreign invaders hostile to our faith and heritage? The answer to both questions is; countless times.

And yet, wherever they were scattered, and however little they had, the first thing our ancestors did was to come together to build an altar and offer thanks to the Lord. This act acknowledged and confirmed two essential things. First it gave due thanks that Christ, the Good Shepherd, for delivering us yet again from the sin and violence of this world. And second, like that border collie circling around our feet, the church draws a circle around God's flock, keeps them together; for a sheep alone might be a dead sheep, but as part of a larger body of believers in Christ, there is safety and accountability.

As part of God's flock, encircled under the dome of St. Hagop, we are of course called to continue and deepen our fellowship with our Good Shepherd and our brothers and sisters of this flock. The first step in doing so is to listen to and take to heart Jesus' words to us today; "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." The first step, which is a daily, hourly step, is to put God first in everything we do. To put aside all of our fears and insecurities that accompany life in this world and trust in our Good Shepherd to provide and protect.

The second step, which is a daily step, is for us to become more and more aware of who Christ has brought together in our flock, and to offer our care and protection to whoever is faltering, whoever is off on their own. Be it a parishioner who is struggling and needs a call, a local neighbor in need who has dropped by the church, or a countryman in Armenia or Syria in need, we are called to care for each other as Christ cares for us.

In this way, with Christ as our Shepherd and fellow believers around us, we find safety in the flock. We give thanks on the Feast of Holy Etchmiadzin that Christ has bound us together in his love; and that as part of God's flock, we're protected by Him and by each other; so that we will never perish, now and always; amen.