

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 5

DO YOU SEE THE SHEEP?

As you consider the sheep grazing in the distance, what biblical references come to mind?

Perhaps it is the Parable of the Lost Sheep, when the shepherd leaves behind his flock to find and care for one. Maybe it is when Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. While there are countless references, the comparison of the people of God to the sheep of the shepherd is shared by most all of them. As a sheep relies on its shepherd to be attended to, cared for and spared from danger, so too are we to rely on God.

In today's reading from Isaiah, the providence of God as shepherd and caretaker is met with relief in the face of the suffering and uncertainty the Israelites have experienced. A beautiful image is depicted of God answering them as soon as their cries are heard, offering them rain for the seed which will be sowed, pasture for their animals. In essence, it is an affirmation that God will attend to their every need — as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

Jesus takes on a similar role in the gospel story when he charges the disciples with curing the sick, raising the dead, etc. He sees the suffering and feelings of abandonment in the crowds that have gathered, comparing them to sheep without a shepherd. He is moved with pity to care for them, reminding the disciples that, "Without cost you have received, without cost you are to give." Therefore, while we are to trust in the providence of God always, we are called also to care for one another — especially those who are vulnerable or marginalized — just as the disciples are called to in the gospel.



We know that COVID-19 has highlighted over and over again the health disparities experienced by Black communities, Indigenous communities and other communities of color. As a result, it must also highlight our call to address social determinants of health. As we re-think and re-imagine how we build the Kingdom of God in a post-pandemic world, we are called to consider specifically and concretely how the Catholic health ministry can play a pivotal role in ensuring health equity for all.

The juxtaposition of reliance on God and the charge to cure and care for the sick and dying is especially poignant for frontline caregivers who work in Catholic health care. Consider the many images that have circulated over the past year of PPE-clad nurses, doctors, chaplains and other caregivers taking the time to hold a patient's hand in their last moments of life when the sick and dying could not be surrounded by loved ones. Indeed, while we do all in our power to care for and cure, we know also, that prayer is a necessary component to any treatment plan.

Can you think of a time when this has been true in your own work or life experience? Like the sheep who honors their shepherd, how are you learning to rely on God in this season? Like the disciples who serve as shepherd, how is your discipleship calling you to address health disparities in your own context?

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