

Did you notice the readings today were a little heavy on the “shepherds” imagery? Just in case you were distracted, are some highlights:

- The first reading from Jeremiah spoke to the Lord’s disdain for the shepherds who mislead and fail to care for his flock;
- The psalm was from the perspective of one of the flock – who relies on the Lord as a shepherd for protection, rest and refreshment of the soul;
- The Gospel acclamation spoke to the sheep hearing and following the Lord’s voice;
- Finally, there’s the Gospel of Mark that leaves us with the image is of the crowd following the disciples who have gone off to rest. Jesus, moved with pity, compared the crowd to sheep without a shepherd.

The image of the shepherd is familiar to us, even us urbanites who haven’t grown up on a farm. We’ve been told that the Lord our shepherd since we were children. God will be there for us, to lead us back to the flock with a firm but loving hand. It’s a relatively easy relationship to understand. God, our protector, is a good shepherd. We need only listen to God’s commands in order to be provided for both in terms of our physical needs for food, water and shelter, and for our spiritual needs – the refreshment of our soul.

And yet, we stubborn sheep still struggle... even when the readings hit us over the head with the same simple message: that our connection to God will provide us with spiritual depth, growth and contentment.

I recently spent a week at the cottage with my husband and my “almost” three-year-old son. The family cottage is a gem of isolation: there are phones, no television, no internet and no wireless reception for my Blackberry. We also have very few neighbours, and of the small number there – there are no young

children. So we set out to spend time at the cottage: just lake, sky, earth and mosquitos.

Before leaving, I prepared for the long days of entertaining a toddler without any other children around. I may have been cautious. I may have been terrified. I packed the usual books, toys, water play equipment and music... and the more unusual, a laptop, short DVDs, an iPhone loaded with children's games. I was not going to be caught at 5am (my son's preferred waking time) with nothing to distract him because this was my vacation too and like the disciples in today's Gospel, I needed to rest.

The first morning at the cottage was one of those blissful mornings when it was my husband's turn to get up early with my son. I got to sleep until the luxurious hour of 7:30am. By the time I got up and made my way to the kitchen, my husband had taken my son fishing, they'd had oatmeal for breakfast and were about to read a book. No laptop, no DVDs. Seeing the puzzled look on my face, my husband asked "What did you think we were going to do?"

Hunh. Right.

You see, my exhaustion from the daily grind of a working mom has me seeking out rest, and while I likely do need rest, what I suspect I need even more is spiritual fulfilment and a greater connection with those closest to me. Not the disconnection of technology that the world already provides. In a world where many of us carry at least one digital device on our person at all times, the habit of interacting with those devices has become part of who we are – part of how we exist... Be it communicating on Facebook, texting on our iPhones, working on our Blackberries, or playing videos for our kids. Technology is part of how we work and play. It is seen as the way to make our lives easier but we tend to let it consume us, to allow it to become our crutch, our addiction.

Now, not all of us are addicted to technology, some of us are find other distractions to shepherd our lives. The sources are everywhere and most of us aren't even aware of how dependent on them we've become to orient our lives until we can't access them.

It can be almost anything: using shopping as an activity for the momentary high it provides or the self-esteem one gets from owning stuff. Some of us turn to all encompassing eating restrictions or exercise regimens promising better health or trimmer waistlines. Or we throw ourselves into our jobs, or hobbies or sports so we can strive for excellence as a way of measuring success. Some of us even focus on our children as representations of our own self worth – our lives dedicated to make sure they're perfect. These can all become ways we seek the fulfilment and contentment that we should seek through spiritual depth, not personal improvement.

But, I think as a society, we've confused the two and that confusion is leaving us feeling isolated and disconnected.

Worse yet, sometimes we make the mistake of actually relying on human beings as shepherds.

Some of you may have had such experiences – let down by a well known figure be it a politician, sport celebrity, artist, radio host because while they may possess an admirable skill, they are human, and make mistakes... sometimes big ones. But we human sheep have a tendency to turn our admiration of individuals for something specific into a belief that they are perfect or that if we emulate them it will help us reach personal fulfilment.

Think of the imagery in the Gospel, the crowd following Jesus and the disciples like an aimless herd – needing the hand of the shepherd – Jesus pities them, because they are so lost, so

directionless. Unfortunately, I suspect we're still in need of the shepherd's guidance back to the flock... we still deserve Jesus' pity.

The problem with the Lord as shepherd is that He is not convenient. Doing what Jesus teaches isn't glamorous and doesn't provide us with the immediate gratification. It often doesn't even come to us naturally. We actually have to try to listen to the voice we cannot see or hear. It takes effort in a society where habits, personalities and obsessions fuel most of what we see around us and what others seem to value.

So what do we do? Well, I'm not sure – but if my trip to the cottage taught me anything, it's that we give up on our false shepherds as often as possible. Over the course of the week, we never did take that laptop out. And yes, some of my mornings were a bit sleepy, but we had tea parties with stuffed animals, we read a lot, we made muffins, we made up new games, we prayed, we sang and even though I sometimes got up at 5am, I came back feeling rested nonetheless because I'd improved my connection with my family and realized how to take the next step to improve my connection with God too.