Maybe you were home for thanksgiving and found yourself suppressing various aspects of your identity to keep the peace.
Or the opinionated uncle sucker you into revealing parts of your self with the usual dissatisfying outcome. You are just recovering.

Because some aspects of our identity are forged, whether we like it or not, in context of conflict—religion, sexuality, politics.

Each of us is a mixture of identity ingredients (where we’re from, occupation, school, gender, race, age, ethnicity, religion, all that). Some identities we choose, some are given, some imposed. And they shift [mine as youngest, now Sharonda calls me Gramps].

Much of our identity comes by striving: say, to meet family expectation. I live near sororities/fraternities: rush week is an exhibition of striving for a coveted identity in the Greek system.

Identity in relation to God as we understand God can involve a kind of striving too—to be spiritual, to live up divine ideals...

We need a rest from all that striving. In relation to God, we need an identity to relax into rather strive for. Propose one from ancient writings of Israel: SHEEP. In relation to God we are sheep.

Aiden’s reading of Psalm 100 reminds us of this: Who are we in relation to God? We are sheep. Here is an identity to relax into. [We are finishing a series on humility—understanding our limits]

Know this: The Lord himself is God; *
he himself has made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Who are we in relation to God? Children, yes, sinners, yes, but most prominent might be sheep. 400 references to sheep in Bible, more than any other animal. 100 references to
shepherds (Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Moses, David, the daughters of Jethro, Amos were all shepherds.) A major branch of biblical literature is called “pastoral”—God as shepherd for people, which makes us, in relation to God, sheep.

Here’s important part: not that we naturally think of ourselves as sheep (when asked at the ice-breaker, “if you were an animal which one would you be?” how many us say, “sheep”) ...but that God regards us as sheep.

I like the low expectations involved. We don’t aspire to be sheep. We accept the fact that we are sheep. Sheep: prone to wander, not brightest creatures by reputation, and utterly dependent on the care of a higher power [shepherd]...sheep can’t find their way to the sheepfold even when it’s in sight...sheep known to die of panic in the face of a predator.

My favorite sheep passage is from prophet Ezekiel. Set stage. Ezekiel was a priest sent into exile with fellow Jews after Babylonians destroyed temple, ravaged Jerusalem. During this period authorities over the people [civil authorities and the religious authorities] were famously corrupt—narcissistic, self-serving, using their power to benefit the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable, entirely lacking empathy. We’re in such a period—I can’t remember a time in my life when I was more disappointed in people who have power/influence....

Ezekiel is channeling God’s concern, his emotions toward people suffering under corrupt leadership—not just Babylonian overlords but those who are supposed to lead for the benefit of the people.

**Ezekiel 34:11-16**

Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich
pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Now the picture behind this picture. Sheep stay in a sheep-pen at night guarded by shepherd. In morning shepherd leads them out to grazing lands...if all goes well they hang together munch on grasses then lie down in hot afternoon to rest for hours, get up graze some more on way back to the sheepfold before nightfall. There the shepherds tend the sheep—bind their wounds (scraps-cuts) see which ones might be getting sick, apply remedies, water them, tuck them in for the night. On a good day that is.

But it’s not a good day for the people in this time. The sheep are scattered as if by storms or attack animals—only the scattering is caused by corrupt leadership. By instinct, threatened sheep head for higher ground, so in hilly-craggy mountainous terrain of middle east, some go up one slope, others another. It’s chaos, lots of sheep missing, out of sight, running into trouble up in hills.

So first, before any wounds can be tended the shepherd is running from the few sheep that remain huddled together—up one hill-mountainside after another to rescue, by ones or twos or threes the scattered sheep now in trouble. Often carrying the terrified sheep (who weigh about the same as an adult human) back to the flock.

Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land;

Did you see Hacksaw Ridge? Desmond Doss, C.O. during WW2, becomes a medic. In Battle of Okinawa, his unit assigned to take Hacksaw Ridge...Doss kept going back after his unit had retreated...to pull back injured soldiers one by one to edge
of cliff with the rope ladder. After each rescue, “Lord let me get one more…” by end, rescued 75.

A picture of a shepherd rescuing lost-scattered sheep. After which sheep gathered back together to be tended.

I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

How about that last line? There’s been all this metaphorical feeding on good grazing land, but this last line takes us out of realm of metaphor into real life: I will feed them with justice. Nothing sentimental about justice.

Women make 70 cents on the dollar compared to men. Justice is an extra 30 cents then, on every dollar earned by a woman. Justice is not having to choose between putting up with harassment and keeping your job or advancing. For African Americans, it’s an economic playing field that accounts for the fact that years of slavery and then discrimination stole wealth from your ancestors, which means from you (since the dead don’t take their money with them, it is passed on to heirs.) For our gay and trans members it’s the end of laws still on books that allow discrimination. It’s families/communities that understand and accept you rather than mourn and reject you.

I will feed them with justice. OK, that’s concrete: this is the aim of God in the world—to recreate the world so those who lack justice, get justice.

Jesus took up the prophetic mantle of divine shepherd. He said, “The one who does not gather with me scatters…” Background is Ezekiel 34. We humans are sheep and God is a shepherd. We wander, we get lost, scattered...we need rescuing, we need gathering, we need tending. And we start to regard each other with that same sympathetic understanding.
As we relax into that identity, we can begin to see that we are called to gather those who have been scattered by corrupt leaders who use their power to benefit themselves. There’s a lot of that going on right now. So we have our work cut out for us. We have purpose and a mission...but that purpose and that mission are only accessed as we relax into an identity as sheep.

Jesus says, don’t be part of that: He who does not gather with me scatters...” And the care we give each other isn’t just compassion, it’s working for a world that does justice.

But all of that begins, is contingent on, is fueled by knowing God as a shepherd who regards you as a sheep. And relaxing into that as a core feature of your identity. You are a sheep and the people around you are also sheep.

This is a long-term project, as it would take a shepherd a long time to restore a scattered flock one by one.

The shepherd running around rescuing one sheep then another bringing them back into a flock and that night the shepherd is exhausted but has extra tending to do because so many sheep are so beat up.

MEDITATION
Know this: The Lord himself is God [and by implication, we are not—Oh good, that sounds like a lot of pressure, I can relax: Know this: The Lord himself/herself/themself is God [and I am not, and the people whose approval I seek are not]. He himself has made us, and we are his or ‘God has made us and we are God’s own’ [OK, so there is some fundamental identity—an ingredient more powerful and unchanging than all the other things in our identity mix, that we all share, that is simply given, and even if we don’t know it or realize it, God knows it.] We are his people [we are his humans/creatures] and the sheep of his pasture.