

# Our Good Shepherd

John 10: 1 – 18

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Three thousand years ago, the Israelites were led to reconsider their image of God. Besides being mysterious and remote living on Mount Sinai, surrounded by billowing clouds of smoke, God was slowly being recognized as the shepherd of his flock. This new revelation inspired the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, beginning with the words,

The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.  
He makes me to lie down  
in green pastures,  
he leads me beside the still waters,  
he restores my soul.

Unlike their pagan neighbors, the Israelites came to know God as omnipotent, far beyond us but also personal, living within and around us.

Although we know the Shepherd's Psalm by heart, we often return to that distant and exacting image of God. Even after Jesus showed himself to be the Good Shepherd laying down his life for his sheep, for many of us God still remains far away and foreboding. We misinterpret the phrase "God-fearing" to mean God should be feared, not realizing the word "fear" in this context means being awed by God's majesty.

Maybe we need to memorize and repeat the mantra, "God is love." (1 John 4:16) Even though we are still sinners, God's judgment is tempered by love. God so loved the world, he became flesh and offered up his life for our salvation.

As we celebrate Holy Communion this morning, the Scriptures invite us to revisit that image of the God as Good Shepherd. At the same time, also recall Christ's dual role: the shepherd of the flock and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Mixing the metaphors of shepherd and lamb seems contradictory until we enter the mystery of the incarnation to find it seamlessly blending into the mystery of the cross.

Being urbanites and suburbanites, most of us know next to nothing about shepherding or sheep. But the first listeners in Jesus audience did. Living in an agrarian culture, everyone knew at least one shepherd since shepherding was the largest occupation. Lacking that generation's knowledge on the subject, we need to get up to speed on the shepherding lifestyle.

We can begin with Jesus pointing out the difference between shepherds, the owners of the flocks and the hired hand. At the first sign of danger the hired hand would run away because Jesus explained, "The hired hand does not care for the sheep."

On the other hand, the shepherd risked life and limb to save his sheep from prowling wolves. This wasn't just for economic reasons.

Being out in the fields with their flocks for long stretches of time, shepherds became emotionally attached to their sheep having the same affection you have for your pets. At the same time, like your dogs and cats, the sheep naturally grew dependent on their shepherds, following them wherever they went.

Remember the nursery rhyme?

“Mary had a little lamb with fleece  
as white as snow.  
And everywhere that Mary went,  
the lamb was sure to go.”

Taking advantage of that unique relationship between a shepherd and his flock, Jesus taught a simple but powerful lesson to his disciples. Since sheep instinctively trust their shepherd, Christians are expected to make the decision to intentionally follow Jesus. When the Master's voice calls, our responsibility is to listen and follow wherever Jesus takes us. But that doesn't always happen.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “We, like sheep have gone astray.” (Isaiah 53:6)

Instead of always obeying the Master's voice, we can become like little lambs nibbling away from green pastures and into the woods where wolves are waiting to pounce. But there is a difference. Sheep wander off because they don't know any better. We wander off because we think we know better. There's greener grass somewhere out there and we want to find it. Instead, we find trouble until we reluctantly admit we really do need a shepherd to guide us back on the right path.

Isaiah hit the nail on the head. Like sheep, we stray off when it suits us. But let's focus on the positive. Like sheep we also have the capacity to trust and follow our shepherd.

I'm told a shepherd can hold up his staff horizontally in front of a ram and it will jump over the staff. The next sheep in line instinctively follows. When the shepherd drops his or her staff to the ground, each succeeding sheep will jump like the one before.

Here's where some people feel insulted for being compared to sheep. It sounds like we're expected to give mindless obedience to an authority figure. But we have to remember metaphors aren't always perfect. It's true, we're not totally like sheep. Created in God's image we have a free will and the right to choose. When we do choose wisely and everything falls into place. If we don't, everything falls apart. But even when you choose unwisely, there's still good news. The Good Shepherd drops everything and comes looking for you. When found he brings you home.

Jesus also warned there are plenty of counterfeit shepherds calling out your name, inviting you to go where you shouldn't be going. We need to learn to tell the difference between

the Good Shepherd's voice and all those competing voices. Created in God's image, we've been given the ability to tell the difference. If that voice just doesn't sound right and promises things too good to be true, then back away fast. Following that voice only brings pain and ruin.

By the grace of God, we get second chances until we finally get it right. I'm sure you know scores of people who lost their way until, they finally listened to the one voice calling them back to the right path. Along the way, they experienced and caused needless pain for themselves and others. Many of their family members and friends gave up out of frustration or from tough love.

Not the good Shepherd. He keeps looking for these lost sheep or better still, God patiently waits for them to start looking for him. Of course, the Good Shepherd was present with them the whole time. They just weren't ready to open their ears to receive forgiveness and redemption. Then they can lick their wounds and start living again.

As it happens, some self inflicted wounds never heal completely, for good reason. They serve as reminders of the hard lessons learned, for their good and to help others who strayed on the wrong path and decide they also had enough and are ready to be found.

The Belgium monk, Henri Nouwen coined the phrase "wounded healers." Sometimes only someone who went through hell and back has the best chance reaching out and pulling a lost soul from the brink. This explains the success of Alcoholics Anonymous. Only one who's "been there" can help someone who's still there.

This is certainly true within the body of Christ. The apostle Paul exhorts us to 'bear one another's burdens.' Sometimes we need to be shepherded and other times we need to shepherd others. But shepherding goes beyond shepherding each other in the church.

From the first day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit transformed the twelve disciples, they spilled out into the streets to begin preaching the gospel. They also reached out to the lost, confused people in their neighborhood. The first members of the church discovered their mission. That same mission is now our mission. If we neglect it, we can't be Christ's eyes and ears and hands and feet in the world around us. That's why the Good Shepherd shepherds us, so he can shepherd others through us.

Jesus said, "And I have other sheep, not of this fold; I will bring them also and they will keep my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." (John 10:16)

There are sheep out there who'll listen to Jesus voice, if the sheep in here follow Jesus' example and lay down our lives for them. Like Jesus, we have dual roles too. We are sheep called to be shepherds, the keepers of the keys of God's kingdom.

Last Sunday the theme of the sermon was about our ability to believe capacity to doubt. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have come to believe but have not seen." Jesus said this to the disciple we now call, Doubting Thomas.

Although not as well-known as the apostle Paul, Thomas had an illustrious career as an evangelist. His ministry took him to far away India. There he founded the first Christian church. Like all the other apostles, except John the Beloved Disciple, Thomas died a martyr's death. Despite his doubts about God and himself, he finally listened to and obeyed his Master's voice. The sheep became a shepherd.

As you meditate on the Eucharist, the celebration of Christ's real presence, especially keep in mind his role as the good Shepherd laid down his life for his sheep. Then, go do likewise.