

WHY OUR SHEPHERD IS GOOD

Psalm 23

John 10:1-6; 11-21

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Few of us know anything about shepherding. That wasn't always the case. Before populations shifted from rural to urban, shepherds were commonly neighbors and relatives. In Jesus' day, shepherds were as numerous as secretaries are now. So when Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, his listeners instantly knew what he was talking about. They knew how hard they worked, their place in society as well as the dangers they faced on the job.

Being a shepherd wasn't easy. They didn't just lean on their staffs all day when they weren't napping on the green grass beside the still waters. A shepherd had to be on his toes, keeping watch over his flock by day and by night just in case one wandered off to where the wolves were patiently waiting. What's more like the mailman, it was an all weather profession, lived out in the open. It was a solitary life.

Ironically even though shepherding was honest work it wasn't consider a noble profession by the respectable people. Shepherds were seen as semi-skilled roughnecks.

What's more if you were a priest or a Pharisee, you had still another reason to look down your nose at them. Shepherds worked around the clock seven days a week, therefore they couldn't keep the Sabbath even if they wanted to. And by "keeping" I don't just mean going to the neighborhood synagogues to worship every seventh day. They also broke the Sabbath by working on the seventh day. You'd think the Temple Priests would be tolerant and grant a dispensation since it was the shepherds who provided the lambs that were needed for the required sacrifices in the Temple. Unfortunately the priests had no problem lumping shepherds in with tax collectors, prostitutes and other assorted sinners.

Even so, despite the self-righteous opinions of the blue noses, shepherding was a vital profession with very high standards.

When Jesus declared "I am the Good Shepherd" the Pharisees must have gagged while everyone else smiled. Jesus likened himself to the common man. He was one of them, not afraid of humble work, willing to climb down the ladder of success and accept the shepherd's calling to nurture and protect his sheep.

"I am the Good Shepherd." I don't think we urbanites really appreciate the implications of what Jesus means when he says, "I'm the Good Shepherd." We all remember the idealized images of Jesus in the Sunday School classroom portraying a meek and gentle Jesus holding a lamb in his arms, the sort of picture that draws children

in and makes them feel safe. But when we become adults aren't we expected to give up childish things? The time has come to look beyond Jesus with Sunday School eyes until we see the tough and resilient Jesus hiding beneath his meek and mild exterior.

But also look again at the innocent lamb held in the shepherd's arms and remember how many of the new born spring lambs were given over to be sacrificed at the Passover. If you get vicarious comfort from the image of Jesus holding and protecting his lambs in his arms, maybe we should remember what Paul wrote to the Romans "...offer up yourselves as a living sacrifice, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) What's good for the shepherd is good for the sheep.

To make the image of the Good Shepherd a little more edgy, take time to carefully reread the entire passage from the tenth chapter of John's Gospel that was read this morning, but for now let's put it in the context of what happened just before Jesus proclaimed himself to be the Good Shepherd.

In the ninth chapter we read about Jesus healing a blind man in the Temple. This took place on Palm Sunday several days before Good Friday.

The religious establishment, true to form, went ballistic. They held investigations trying to make a case against Jesus, using the once blind man as the chief witness for the prosecution. But the blind man failed to go along. He berated the Priests by boldly saying, "Here is an astonishing thing you say you do not know where he comes from but he opened by eyes... If this man (Jesus) were not from God he could do nothing."

Frustrated the Pharisees kicked him out of the Temple. Hearing all about this travesty Jesus returned to the scene of the crime and in response to the failed leadership of the priests and Pharisees then and there declared, "I am the Good Shepherd."

But not right away. Before saying this he said some other things we tend to overlook probably because it sounds complicated. He started off by first saying something about bandits sneaking into what he called the sheepfold.

Let's stop here and explain what a sheepfold is. A sheepfold is a corral, where the sheep are herded into at night time to keep them safe. The gate keeper is one of the shepherds who was assigned the task of opening the gate and calling the sheep to come inside. This gate keeper walked ahead of the heard and because the sheep know the gate keeper's voice they follow him in.

Keep in mind Jesus taught this parable in response to the Pharisees denouncing Jesus for healing the blind man on the Sabbath implying the Pharisees were the bandits who crawled over the walls of the Temple to steal the people away. Having above average intelligence the religious leaders had to realize they were the bandits.

Anyway, after the gate was closed the gate keeper, (Jesus said, “I am the gate keeper.”) slept between the gate and the sheep, protecting them from predators, in this case the Pharisees, and to keep the sheep from wandering out and getting lost.

When you hear Jesus’ explanation of the shepherd’s responsibilities doesn’t it make you think differently about Jesus the Good Shepherd, especially when he said, “And I lay down my life for the sheep” which foreshadows what Jesus later said in the Upper Room the night before his crucifixion, “Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Jesus drove home his point further when he went on to say “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” (John 10:17-18) Here Jesus was sending the Pharisees a message loud and clear: “I know you intend to kill me, but I’m ready to die of my own free will.”

By making these incendiary declarations Jesus drew a line in the sand he was prepared to step over. First, he was telling the people he and not the Pharisees, is the true shepherd, therefore don’t listen to them because they’re wolves in sheep’s clothing. Second, Jesus was telling the Pharisees he was ready and waiting for them to crucify him so he could lay down his life in order to take it up again on the third day.

John has many verses in his Gospel that reaffirm God’s love:

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son.” (John 3:16)

After Jesus wept before Lazarus’ tomb the people said, “See how he loved him. (John 11:36)

In the Upper Room Jesus commanded his disciples, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another (John 13:35)

Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he knows and loves the sheep in his flock. Jesus knows each of us by name. The Greek work “knows” implies much more than knowledge, it means the intimate knowing of a loving relationship. So when Jesus declared he knows his sheep, he actually means he loves us. To the Internal Revenue services you are known only by your Social Security number, but God knows you by your name, in the Psalms we’re told even the hairs on our heads are numbered. That means God knows you through and through, your strengths and weaknesses, your good works and your sins and yet God loves you anyway.

The metaphor of Christ being the Good Shepherd and we the sheep reaffirms God’s love for us. You see, sheep aren’t very smart, they carelessly wander off on their own and get into trouble. That’s why sheep need a shepherd and that’s exactly why we need Jesus.

Remember the poetic description illustrating the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep in Psalm 23? The shepherd leads his flock to the green pastures and the still waters. His rod and staff give comfort because they are the shepherd's tools used to keep the sheep together and safe. The sheep trust their shepherd to bring them safely through times of danger and the shepherd anoints the sheep's wounds with healing oils. That's why the Palmist ends his poem with the glorious declaration, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen"

One more thing. Jesus taught that his sheep know and trust him and especially his voice. We are given the gift of knowing Jesus as intimately as Jesus knows us. We know his name we know his voice so we can follow him even when we're taken through the valley of the shadow of death. I take that to mean sometimes Jesus takes us to places we don't want to go, dangerous places out of our comfort zone sometimes through a serious illness that leads to death, or a life crisis that will forever change our lives, and most certainly he'll lead us to people and situations that will require us to lay down our lives for Christ and his Kingdom.

But he also calls us to follow him in another way.

"He prepares a table before me
in the presence of my enemies...
My cup runneth over..."

I used to think this verse meant God prepares a feast for me which I can enjoy while my enemies look on with envy, you know God grants me special favors and everyone else is locked out.

Since then I've come to realize God prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies and then expects me to invite my enemies, who I perceive to be God's enemies, to sit down and feast with me. You know, destroy my enemy by making him my friend.

Isn't that what the Good Shepherd did for you and me? He invited us to feast with him in the Kingdom of God.

Yes, we are sheep and we have gone astray we get lost and the Good Shepherd comes out to find and take us back home to the green pastures besides the still waters and there's always room for one more.

But remember, the shepherd doesn't produce sheep, sheep produce sheep, we with the Shepherd's help are also called to bring more sheep into the fold so others may know what we already know, the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.