

The Good Shepherd

John 10:1-18

Today's story, known as the story of the Good Shepherd, tends to bring to mind the words of the 23rd Psalm – “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The imagery of sheep and shepherds runs all through the Bible. There are 150 uses of the word “sheep” in the Old Testament, with 51 of those in the first five books of the Bible alone! The patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses were all shepherds. Even mighty King David began his career as a humble shepherd.

Shepherding was one of those trades that would have been well known to Jesus' listeners, perhaps not so much to those of us today who didn't grow up on a farm. This lack of knowledge about sheep and how to herd them may put us at a slight disadvantage when trying to understand what Jesus was saying. So I did some research and learned a few things that were not obvious to me at the start. Interestingly, these were some of the same things that were not obvious to Jesus' listeners when he shared this story with them for the first time, either. In verse 6 we read that “Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn't understand what he meant.” We understand that he was talking to the Pharisees, people who likely would not be found hanging out in a meadow with a flock of sheep.

These verses immediately follow those where Jesus told the Pharisees that they were blind. Now perhaps part of the reason this group failed to grasp what Jesus was saying is that he speaks about a “good shepherd.” Right off the bat his audience could have been offended because shepherds were generally thought of as anything but good. Shepherds were considered lower-class, rough and tumble sorts, certainly not people to be entertained in polite company. Yet here is Jesus making the shepherd out to be the hero in this story.

Depending on the translation you use, Jesus begins with the words, “Verily, verily”, “I tell you the truth”, or like the NIV “Very truly I tell you”. In any case He was letting folks know this was really important stuff He was about to share with them. And although this story has come

to be known as the Good Shepherd, Jesus begins by talking about thieves and robbers. But the thieves and robbers He's talking about aren't your run-of-the-mill bad guys. Jesus is talking about the religious leaders, the people who were supposed to be shepherding God's flock, the very same people he was speaking to in these verses of Scripture. Perhaps he was recalling these words from Jeremiah 23:1-4 -

“Doom to the shepherd-leaders who butcher and scatter my sheep!” God's Decree. “So here is what I, God, Israel's God, say to the shepherd-leaders who misled my people: ‘You've scattered my sheep. You've driven them off. You haven't kept your eye on them.’”

Unfortunately for God's people, the religious leaders of Jesus' day were more likely to fleece the flock than to care for them. They acted little better than thieves and robbers, concerned only with their own gain and not the welfare of those they were charged to care for. I think it can be easy for us today to look at these verses and think to ourselves, “Yes, those Sadducees and Pharisees were quite a bad bunch! Jesus was right on with what He was saying to them.” But we need to remember that Jesus' words are for all time. Who might he be referring to today?

According to the information I studied, Jesus is speaking to spiritual leaders in all generations. You may be able to think of a few religious leaders who are more snake than shepherd. There have been many high-profile preachers who have ended their careers in disgrace because of their misdeeds in the office of shepherd. Greed for fame, lust and avarice have been their motivation and their flocks have suffered for it. But it's not just high-profile preachers who fall into this trap, priests and pastors in ordinary, everyday churches are not above temptation either. But with that said, I wonder if there isn't more to what Jesus is saying here?

How many of you are familiar with these words from 1 Peter: [1 Peter 2:9](#)

But you are a chosen people, a **royal priesthood**, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

If I'm reading that correctly, all of us are responsible for helping to shepherd God's flock. That doesn't mean that everyone has to be a pastor or teacher, but we are all responsible for living in such a way that we are not detracting from the Kingdom of God.

Okay, so far we have Jesus denigrating the religious leaders and elevating those who were considered "less than." That has a familiar ring doesn't it? Let's continue.

Jesus is telling a story about who he is and why he has come. The sheepfold that Jesus is referring to in this story is the Kingdom of God. Jesus goes on to say that the one who enters by the gate is the true shepherd. And here is where I learned something new, too. Inside the sheepfold was a gatekeeper. When I thought about a gatekeeper, I was thinking of someone who stood outside the gate, something like a doorman at a ritzy hotel. I was wrong.

According to what I have read, the gatekeeper would shut himself up in the sheepfold at night. The gate latched only from the inside, so no one on the outside could enter without the gatekeeper's permission. In the morning the gatekeeper would only open the gate to those he recognized, the true shepherds of the sheep in his care.

Jesus tells us that He is the Good Shepherd, the one the gatekeeper will open the door to when He calls. Who do you think the gatekeeper might be? God is the gatekeeper in this story. He is the one who opens the gates of His Kingdom to those who will enter through Jesus, who is not only the Good Shepherd but also the gate through which all must enter into God's Kingdom.

The shepherd-leaders of Jesus' time didn't seem to be interested in keeping the sheep safe. Would the gatekeeper open to their voices, even if they did come to the gate and call out? Jesus seems to be saying that the gate would remain closed to them because they were not conducting themselves as true shepherds of the flock of God.

Here's something else I learned, more than one flock could be penned in the sheepfold at night. In the morning the shepherds would call to their flocks and only those sheep that belonged to each particular shepherd would follow, because sheep follow the sound of their own shepherd's voice. And the shepherds know their sheep, calling each by name.

The true sheep of God's Kingdom will heed the voice of the Good Shepherd, they will not be led astray by the voice of another. In fact, we are told that the sheep will flee from the voice of a stranger. We are those sheep who respond to Jesus' calling. When we respond, He will lead us.

Here is where Jesus was fueling the ire of the religious elite. The people had been coming to Jesus in droves. The Temple leaders were up in arms because Jesus was challenging their authority; they even tried several times to kill him. Jesus said, if the leaders were truly serving the Lord God, the people would be listening to them. Instead, the people chose to listen to the Good Shepherd. And it wasn't just the Jews who were coming to Jesus, gentiles were also drawn to Him. They are the sheep that were not of the original flock Jesus was called to serve.

There's still more to this story. During my research I learned that shepherding in the Mid-East is different from shepherding in the US. Here in the US shepherds drive their herds from the rear, but in Jesus' time until today, the Bedouin shepherds of Palestine lead their flocks. If a shepherd is driving the flock from behind I would imagine that it would be difficult to see dangers that lie in their path. The shepherd out in front of the flock is able to see any dangers that might be in their way and can choose how best to navigate those dangers. In some cases, the shepherd may lead the flock around the danger, in other cases he might decide to back track and find a different route. Then there may be the time when all the shepherd can do is go through the danger. The sheep will still follow because they are trusting the shepherd to care for them.

So it is with us. There are times when Jesus will lead us around the dangers and snares that await us in this life. There will be other times when it just feels like we are stuck or moving backwards. Then there will be other times when it seems that danger surrounds us. In any event we need to remember who it is that is leading us and that Jesus does not want even one of us to perish. We are reminded of this truth in these words from Isaiah 43:

When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.

In today's story we learn about the difference between the true shepherd and a hireling. The hireling is not invested in the sheep and therefore will not risk their own safety to defend the sheep. On the other hand, Bedouin shepherds have died protecting their flocks from robbers. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is our protector and He cares for us so much that He was willing to lay down His life for us. Fortunately for us, our Shepherd, though He did lose His life, was able to take it up again and is with us still today. Because He is alive and able to lead us today, we the sheep of His flock, need to listen to His voice and follow where He leads. And where does He lead us?

He leads us beside peaceful streams bordering on green meadows. He leads us to rest. Wherever we are in our lives we need to remember that the Shepherd cares for us and wants us to find rest for our bodies and souls. The sheepfold was a secure place where the sheep could feel safe and let down their guard to rest. When we rest we are given renewed strength to help us distinguish the voice of the shepherd from the voice of the stranger. In a world with so many different voices calling to us sometimes we may have to strain to hear the voice of Jesus. We all would do well to seek to hear His voice every day.

He leads us along the right path. Because He leads us and can see the dangers ahead, He will steer us away from trouble. But even when we walk through the darkest valleys, we don't need to be afraid because the Good Shepherd is close beside us. His rod and staff will protect and comfort us. It is in those troubled times that we need most to listen carefully for His voice to guide us through to the other side.

He leads us to healing by anointing us with the oil of His salvation. Just as the shepherd attends to the wounds of his sheep, so Jesus cares for us when we are wounded in spirit. We are blessed to abundance with the ministering's of the Good Shepherd. And because we are his

true sheep who follow the sound of his voice, we rest assured that goodness and unfailing love will follow us all the days of our lives.

Let us pray:

Great and Good Shepherd, we thank you for calling us by name, for granting us rest in the shelter of your fold, and leading us to safety when we are called outside into the world. Hold us closely when we are frightened by the voice of the stranger, don't allow us to run away in fear. Thank you for the healing balm you offer when we are injured and for the loving way you restore us to fellowship with you. May we always find peace in your presence. AMEN

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