

Jim Gill

April 22, 2018

"THE Good Shepherd"
Psalm 23; John 10:11-18; I John 3:16-24

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 23

Abraham, the father of the many nations, was the keeper of great flocks. Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, when God called him into a special service. David was a shepherd boy called in from the fields to be the King of Israel. God has a heart for shepherds. Hear the word of God from one of the most beloved Psalms - Psalm 23.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 10:11-18

Our lives are filled with numbers. This year we had 2 extra days to file our income taxes and still some of us needed an extension. When it is finally prepared, we send it off to the Internal Revenue Service and the IRS takes all those numbers and puts them into a computer, along with the numbers of thousands and thousands of other people.

The government knows us by our Social Security number. The state knows us by our driver's license number. The bank knows us by our account number. And that's why this morning's Gospel reading is so significant, because it tells us that God knows us. He knows us intimately, in fact, better than we know ourselves. In spite of the fact that the image of sheep and shepherd is foreign to most of our experience, the words of the Gospel this morning point to a truth that our human hearts long to hear. The Old Testament writer put it clearly when he wrote, "The Lord is my Shepherd." Jesus says it this morning, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me, and I give them eternal life." 1 Hear the word of the Lord from the gospel of John 10: 11-18

Let's pray. Thank you Lord that you do watch over us, that you care for us, that you provide for us that you lead us. Help us to be willing followers where you lead. Help us to trust you. Speak to us now through this your word. As we meditate on your word may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our redeemer.

The pastor of a nice suburban church was speaking to the Sunday school kids. He told them that as the pastor he was like a shepherd and the members of his congregation were the sheep. He then put this question to them: "What does the shepherd do for the sheep?" A little fellow in the front row raised his hands and answered, "He fleeces them." 2

While it's true that shepherds go into the business for the purpose of fleecing, and for some, feeding on them when the Bible speaks of the leaders of God's

people as shepherds, it envisions leaders who feed the people, who protect the people like a good shepherd does for his flock.

At the Rotary Catfish and Shrimp Fry on May 5th we will have a petting zoo. Those of you with roots on the farm know that sheep are more than those warm, cuddly domesticated animals that city folks experience in a petting zoo when they're standing still. No, sheep in a flock are stubborn and willful and in many senses of the word, defenseless. There are predators always trying to get into the sheep pen: coyotes, bears, wolves, cougars. They aren't interested in shearing or sharing.

Not only do the sheep need to be protected from wild animals but also there are other shepherds who want to add to their flocks by stealing sheep.

In addition to needing protection from predators and thieves, sheep need protection from themselves. When you turn a herd of sheep loose and let them run wherever they desire, they are liable to run off a cliff.

Sheep need to be protected from themselves because they are creatures of habit. To their own destruction they will graze the same hills until they become desert wastes. Without a shepherd to move them along, they will not move along.

Sheep need to be protected from themselves because sheep have bad hygiene: They will pollute their own ground until it is run over with disease and parasites. To their own ill health they will live in their own filth. Without a shepherd to move them along, they will not move along.

Sheep need to be protected from themselves because sheep have heavy coats: Because of their heavy coats, sheep can't drink in running water. Their coats will get wet and the weight will pull them under and they will drown. They have to be led to quiet streams where they can safely drink.

Sheep need to be protected from themselves because sheep can become burdened. Their fleece can grow very long and become weighed down with mud, manure, burrs and debris. Sometimes when they lie down they can roll over. Once on their backs they cannot right themselves unless a shepherd comes and puts them back on their feet.

Sheep need to be led so that they won't graze the ground till its dead and so are they. Sheep need to be led to the quiet streams as opposed to running ones where they could drown. Sheep need to be up righted when they get knocked for a loop. Sheep need to trust in their shepherd to protect them from predators and thieves and from themselves.

Isaiah says, 'All WE like sheep have gone astray. We have turned aside to our own wicked ways.' When Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd he is both making an invitation and stating some facts. The facts are: we really are like sheep. Like sheep WE need protection from predators and thieves. Like sheep WE need protection from ourselves-we are stubborn; we want what we like - even when what we like is not good for us. Like sheep WE need to be led to new green pastures lest we eat ourselves out of house and home. Like sheep WE need the Good Shepherd to come clean us up when we get weighed down with the burrs and mud and debris and yes, the manure of this world. Like sheep WE need the Good Shepherd to come and get us back on our feet when we get knocked over and find ourselves upside down unable to right ourselves. Like sheep WE need somebody to lead us in the right direction. Like sheep We need somebody to help us with our decisions. . Like sheep WE need to listen carefully to our Lord's voice, and one of the best ways to do that is through His Word. Perhaps this has been one of our problems. Jesus' voice is drowned out by the cell phones and the headphones of this world. Jesus' voice, his words, his story, his direction and leading are lost in translation.

We have seen it, haven't we? People, young and old, who are battered by the storms of life and distracted by voices urging them to go this way and that, they have lost their bearings and they don't know where they are or where they are going. That can be more than a little frightening; it leads to despair, to hopelessness. When someone is "sick" or not well they will follow anyone who will promise a moment of happiness, a brief feeling of peace or forgetfulness, a sense that they are someone. (3)

The call of our Lord is often "hidden" or obscured in a whole chorus of worldly voices which beckon us. Other would-be shepherds seek to tempt us away from the joy of his forgiveness and the security of the Good Shepherd's love. When we are weak and confused we may fall victim to the enticements of other shepherds serving other gods.

Sometimes we find ourselves not lying in green pastures but flailing about in blue funks. Sometimes we find ourselves not resting by the shore of still waters but struggling in the valley of dark shadows - perhaps a valley into which we were born, a valley of poverty, or abuse, or illness. Some may have been born into the green pastures of plenty and managed to dig their own shadowy valleys - with drugs or alcohol, or violence.

As I wrote in my column in the Sun on Friday, we are in the midst of an Opioid crisis. Something that is designed to ease pain is being causing pain. At the seminar held at Lee College on Wednesday night they said that 91 people a day die of an overdose of opioids and other drugs in the United States. That means that somewhere in the United States at least 4 people have died of an overdose while we are in worship this morning.

Today we have so many choices and possibilities that only seem to grow more numerous with time and the "advance" of culture. Yet, the many choices that stand before us can be confusing. We need to learn how to wisely use the gift of free will, our ability to choose. We also need to listen to the guidance of the Good Shepherd through the direction of the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 16:6-10 the Holy Spirit blocked the apostle Paul from going to Asia. Paul and Silas wanted to go to Asia. In Presbyterian language they would say, "If the way be clear." The way was not clear and instead in a dream Paul heard a man from Macedonia calling for them to come and preach there. As a result they took the gospel to Europe.

Paul and his team were supernaturally NOT led to go one direction they wanted to go and instead were led to go another. We can sum all this up with one of my favorite Bible verses, Proverbs 16:9. It says, "The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps."

Sometimes even though we are convinced that we are to go one direction the Holy Spirit blocks that way only to open another. The point is, we need to trust the Holy Spirit. We need to go through the doors that are open and not keep knocking on those that are closed. It doesn't matter if we agree with the reasons that they are closed, they are closed.

If we keep only doing what we've always done we'll keep getting what we've always got. Einstein said that. Perhaps it's time we put aside what we want - put aside the questions of how we have always done it, what is good business, or what will offend the least number of people. Perhaps it is time to put aside those concerns and, when there is a decision to be made, and ask what it is that God wants us to do. What are we prevented from doing so we can do what our Good shepherd is leading us TO DO?

Jesus' voice is speaking more than just on Sunday mornings when we take time out of our week to come here. In ALL of our lives, whether it is in church committee meetings, or business board meetings, at work and at play do we spend sufficient time and attention on asking what it is that our Good Shepherd wants? Are we really ready to let him lead? Are we really ready to rely on him in our decisions?

Missionary Herb Schaefer tells about a thirteen-year-old Chinese girl who continued with her family to worship God secretly in their home during the Cultural Revolution in China. At that time religion was forbidden and worship was banned by the Chinese rulers. One evening the Red Guards burst into their small home and threatened them for worshiping Jesus. A small altar with a crude cross stood in one corner of the room. Determined to put a stop to their worship and command complete allegiance to the Communist state, the Red Guard lieutenant demanded they spit on the cross. They refused. The lieutenant

became indignant and shouted at them that unless they spat on the cross they would be killed.

Finally the elder in the group came forward, spat on the cross and left. One by one they followed, doing the same thing until only the thirteen-year-old remained. She refused to do what the others had done. "I cannot and I will not," she replied. Then she told the lieutenant the depth of her faith and said that she was willing to die for it. Remarkably the Lieutenant seemed pleased. "This is the kind of devotion we want for the new China: people who will commit themselves so totally that they are willing to die for what they believe." But he wanted that devotion directed toward Chairman Mao. "We will change you," he promised and left. She was spared, but she never saw the rest of her family again.

The story doesn't end there, however. For shortly thereafter, that little girl fled to Hong Kong and was taken in. Later she entered the Lutheran seminary there and today she is a pastor of the Hong Kong Lutheran Church, serving the needs of countless souls.⁴

She was able to endure, to overcome that tragedy in her life, because she was willing to lay down HER life for the one who laid down his life for her--the Good Shepherd.

Jesus is THE Good Shepherd. He has claimed us. He knows us by name. Even though he knows the number of hairs on our head to him we are not a number. Jesus wants to lead us and point us to the abundant life he came to provide. He has promised to lead us beside quiet streams. He has promised to provide for our needs. He has promised to protect us from wild beasts, from thieves and ... from ourselves. He has promised to prepare a place for us to dwell here and a place for us to dwell with him forever in heaven.

Jesus knows us. He knows you. He loves us. He loves you. He wants you to trust him and follow him because he is ... THE Good Shepherd.

Let's pray. Thank you lord for the care and feeding and leading you offer us. . Thank you for sending Your son Jesus to not only become one with us, to experience life as we know it, to be our Good Shepherd, but also to become the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

We pray for all those who wander this day in the wilderness of broken covenants and confused goals. Give them an awareness of your presence amid their faltering steps, and a sense of direction that will lead them to safety. Keep us from judging them as somehow weak or inferior because they appear aimless or lost. Help us to lend them our understanding as they seek to find their way by following you. Remind us of our own wanderings and our constant need for guidance from you. We pray for all those entrapped by whatever snare restrains them. Loose them and set them free to do your will.

Hear us as we lift our concerns this morning. .

1. CSS Publishing Company, Taking the Risk Out of Dying, by Lee Griess
2. One Life to Give, by B. Wiley Stephens
3. John M. Braaten, The Greatest Wonder of All, CSS Publishing
4. CSS Publishing Company, Inc., Taking the Risk out of Dying, by Lee Griess