

On the lookout for sheep

Preparing for this day has been much more rewarding than I anticipated when I had agreed to speak. The scripture readings and daily prayers for the past 2 months have brought to me a clearer and more beautiful relationship with Christ, my church, and many members of this church. I would like to start with a story that I'm sure many of you know as I have told it a few times, but I feel it is related to today's scripture. Many years ago, about 30, my brothers and I lived in the apartments next door and would roam the playground and church buildings; there were no gates at that time. It was as innocent as playing on the massive red slide, crawdad fishing in the canal behind the church, or a time or two finding a way on the roof. On one of these occasions, it was a Wednesday evening. Salt and light youth program had been going on and Jim and Jackie saw which apartments we ran off to and went over to invite us for food and fellowship. This embodiment of Christ as a shepherd tending to His sheep has extra meaning to me and my relationship with Jesus because the many members of this church "shepherded" me to what has been for many years, my green pastures, my place of calm and comfort. From being baptized here in October of 1999 by John Poling and being married in September 2015 by Norm and the numerous funerals of friends from this congregation, this church and church body is a place of calm and spiritual peace for me, my entire life.

The images brought to mind by Psalm 23 are extremely powerful. I know from a couple weeks ago that this psalm is Rev Larry Hicks' favorite Psalm, and he indicated that it might also be the favorite of many of you here as well. Most of you can recite it by memory, I'm sure of it. Psalm 23 reminding us of the peace and security that we have

found in the still waters of Baptism and the new life that awaits us in the green pastures of the new Eden. Because of this we repeat it to remember what has given us life and the life that is to come. This is without a doubt some of the most inspiring of psalms. As

Abolitionist Henry Beecher describes the Psalm ***“Dying soldiers have died easier as it was read to them; ghastly hospitals have been illuminated; it has visited the prisoner, and broken his chains, and, like Peter’s angel, led him forth in imagination, and sung him back to his home again.”*** Pretty powerful right? The passage in John, however, took me researching what a sheepfold was to have my imagination really take off. My initial guess was that it was a place to put sheep, a fairly simple cage structure. But it often was not permanent as shepherds would stay with their sheep, day and night. They wouldn’t go home, they camped out with their sheep. Rarely did they camp in the open field. They camped in a sheepfold at night. Weather, thieves, and predators were the main danger and nighttime had higher risk of those occurring. A sheepfold can be anything from a cave, makeshift shed, sometimes it was even a large grassy area and they would stack rocks. I also saw that they would sometimes even use branches stacked on top of each other and if the branches had thorns on it, GREAT! Stack those on top to provide even more safety. Can you picture it? Maybe even picturing Jesus as the Bridegroom with his own crown of thorns.

The sheepfold only had one way in and the same way out and what ultimately made the sheepfold a safe place is the presence of the shepherd in that doorway. The shepherd had to sleep, herding and building this sheepfold. What shepherds would do, is they would lay down in the doorway, so effectively become ‘the door’ or the ‘gate’ so anything going in

and out of the sheepfold would have to go through him. After looking all this up, I'm reminded of my son as an infant and I would put him on his mat in the corner of the room and I would lay on my side and essentially make my body the wall, and I would sleep but also keep him contained.

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus says he provides the critical elements of abundant life: water (4:14) but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. bread of life (6:35) "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, light of the world (9:5), and here, shelter in the form of a sheepfold. The Lord uses the powerful imagery of Psalm 23: the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. There is good, green grass and still waters, and it is the presence of the shepherd that makes the field safe and nourishing.

The shepherd is keeping us safe, but are there dangers? Part of the mystery of faith is the presence of danger, even while in the sheepfold and the fields of good, green grass. There are strangers, thieves, and bandits; the flock will even cross through the "valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4 KJV). I also believe it is because we wander off. Sometimes we as sheep, are our own worst enemy. Isaiah 53 6 says

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way;"

I have not spent a lot of time with sheep personally, but I'm told being compared to one is not a complement. We tend to wander. Globally, even all the way down to our little church, as we are without a pastor, it might be tempting to presume that our church does not have a shepherd, and the flock is in danger of being lost. John 10 assures us that Jesus

has always been and will always be the shepherd of his people. Then I suppose that means that Norm was really more of a sheepdog than a shepherd.

I would also like to bring another vision to mind. Thinking of a sheep that has completely turned over on its back and is kicking its feet in the air, this sheep would need immediate attention so as to not get dehydrated or be noticed by a predator. For a sheep to become “cast”, there were many ways a sheep could end up this way. It might be an ewe with a lamb, an overweight sheep, or even a sheep that for whatever reason had wool too long. However a sheep became “cast”, the attentive shepherd would notice very quickly and would immediately stop what they were doing and think “I must get that cast sheep back on its feet”. The parable of the lost sheep echoes this. Matthew 18:12-13 says:

¹² “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? ¹³ And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that *sheep* than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray.

Christ has the same sensations of urgency, concern, and compassion for the cast men and women as the shepherd has for cast sheep. It may explain his grace and compassion for down-and-out individuals for whom even human society had no use. Christ as our shepherd shows us the depth of understanding he has for his people and that he comes eagerly and quickly, ready to help, to save, to restore.

Whether our role is the sheep dog or shepherd, being part of the body of believers means we are called to be on the lookout for sheep that are down and out, cast away by society. So if you see someone with their feet flailing in the air. They might need help finding their feet.

Scott Burns