

3/15/20

“I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD”

**John 10:11-18
Ezekiel 34:1-5a, 11-16**

George Adam Smith, the 19th century biblical scholar tells of traveling one day in the holy land and coming across a shepherd and his sheep. He fell into conversation with him and the man showed him into the fold into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls, with a way in. Smith asked him, “This is where they go at night?” “Yes,” said the shepherd, “and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe.” “But there is no door,” said Smith. “I am the door,” said the shepherd. He was not a Christian man and wasn’t speaking in the language of the New Testament. He was speaking from an Arab shepherd’s viewpoint. Smith looked at him and asked, “What do you mean you are the door?” “When the light has gone,” said the shepherd, “and all the sheep are inside, I lie in that open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door.”

Of course, we heard this from Pastor Brenda last week and she gave us a good picture of that reality. What stands out in my heart is that she told us that the shepherd would inspect each of the sheep as they entered that safe enclosure, being sure they were not wounded, making sure they did not have a parasite, or some problem that would harm them. Such an image of our Good and Loving Shepherd who brings healing to us!

We are the sheep of our Lord’s pasture! So, it might be interesting to note a few characteristics of sheep: Sheep are defenseless animals, they are prone to go astray, sheep have poor eyesight, they tend to follow other sheep without thinking, and they are stubborn. Maybe we are catching on to why we are referred to by our Lord as sheep! I think we get an even clearer picture when we consider that there are at least four conditions that must be met before sheep will lie down and relax: they must be free from fear, free from friction with others in the flock, free from parasites and pests, and free from hunger. And I wonder sometimes why I can’t sleep!

Jesus said not only, “I am the Door for the Sheep.” He also said, in just a few short verses, “I am the Good Shepherd.” In this first part of chapter 10, Jesus talks about being the Shepherd of the sheep, about how the sheep hear the true shepherd's voice and follow his voice, not the voice of someone else, but his voice. This shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

He says “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. This says something important to me. We belong to Him. We are the sheep of his flock. Yes, Jesus is the true shepherd, the faithful shepherd, the one who truly cares for and will protect his sheep, the real Shepherd of Israel. I’ve heard it rightly said that Jesus is

our protector, provider, our portion and our pathway. Wow, all of this so true of our Good Shepherd.

The shepherd was an important symbol in Israel. For much of their history they were a nomadic people dependent upon their sheep for their livelihood. Because of this, sheep and shepherd imagery was very important. The King was often referred to as the Shepherd of Israel. The ancient kings of Israel were different from the kings of the nations around them. The other kings were held up to be gods on earth, divine beings in human form. The kings of Israel were not believed to be divine; they were known to be ordinary human beings who represented God on earth and ruled in God's name. The idea was that God had placed the responsibility for the nation in their hands.

The kingdom was not theirs to do with as they pleased. The kingdom was God's and they were to take care of it and God's people in God's name and with God's help. And even great King David failed to do it right all the time. Our Old Testament Lesson from Ezekiel contains a complaint about the shepherds of Israel. They did not really care for the sheep or seek them when lost or bind their wounds. Our Lord tells us God will seek us out, will bind our wounds, and strengthen the weak. Our Lord will rescue us, even giving his life that we may live. He knows us. He knows our hearts. He is the one who brings healing into our lives in so many ways.

Knowing our need, yes, and aren't we feeling that need for healing and protection and assurance, right now, in ways we did not imagine? Acknowledging this great need, still we have to admit - we humans want to do things our way. In other words, Isaiah 53:6 seems to describe us some times: "All we like sheep have gone astray; each of us has gone his own way."

All the more reason for we sheep in his fold to seek his healing touch and then extend that reach, that touch with others. I have no doubt, in fact I feel it in a special way in the situation our land and our world faces right now, that our calling today is to live our lives in such a way that the voice of the Christ is shared with the world precisely in the way we choose to show his love and in the way we tell God's story. May his story be our story. Let it live in you, let it breathe in you!

Pastor John Ortberg used this illustration and I share it now: A man was being tailgated by a woman in a hurry. He comes to an intersection, and when the light turns yellow, he hits the brakes. The woman behind him goes ballistic. She honks her horn at him; she yells her frustration in no uncertain terms; she rants and gestures.

While she is in mid-rant, someone taps on her window. She looks up and sees a policeman. He invites her out of her car and takes her to the station where she is searched and fingerprinted and put in a cell. After a couple of hours, she is released, and the arresting officer gives her back her personal effects, saying

"I'm very sorry for the mistake, ma'am. I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, using bad gestures and bad language. I noticed the WHAT WOULD JESUS DO bumper sticker, the FOLLOW ME TO SUNDAY SCHOOL window sign, the FISH EMBLEM on your trunk, and I naturally assumed you had stolen the car.

How we live our lives sends a message to the world. When Martin Luther said that the church is a "priesthood of believers," he didn't mean that we are all pastors; he meant that we all carry Christ into the world in our words and in our actions.

The Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for us sheep, has called us to follow his lead. Barbara Brown Taylor asks, the question: What happens when he lays down his life; who protects those sheep after he dies? Well, I will tell you. On the night before he died, they all fell asleep after a big meal, with the sound of the shepherd's voice, his last words and actions, very much on their minds and hearts.

But that night they all shared a terrible dream as they slept: a dream of wolves and clubs and torches that came out of the woods, led their shepherd away, and tore him to shreds on a hillside outside of town.

In the dream, they huddled for safety, unable to think unable to move, and they stayed that way for three whole days, wondering if they would starve to death before the wolves came back to finish the job. But then on the third day they heard a familiar voice – a voice that woke them from their fear and their fright. Suddenly they stood again in the presence of their good shepherd.

Everything was the same again, and yet everything had changed. Looking around at each other, they saw what had happened. Lo and behold, they had fallen asleep as sheep, but they had woken up as shepherds. As they slept, every one of them had been changed into the image of their master, and as they stood there staring at one another he handed them staves like his and he breathed a peace upon them as he sent them out to gather their own flocks. "Do for them as I did for you." And it's true. He told us, didn't he, that night when he washed their feet? Do you hear his voice and will you follow his way? **Will the sheep become the shepherds?** May it be so, all possible because of a Shepherd called Good. Amen.