

May 7, 2017
“We Have a Shepherd”
Psalm 23

Introduction

Fleming Rutledge tells the story of when her cousins Sylvia and Frederic traveled from their rural home in Pennsylvania to the big city of Philadelphia to attend a performance of Handel's Messiah. They put on their Sunday best, and drove into the city to the performance hall.

One of the well-known sections of this magnificent composition is from the prophet Isaiah: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.”

And in the fashion of Baroque vocal works, the various phrases of this work were repeated many times. So when the words were sung, “All we like sheep have gone astray,” the chorus sang over and over, “We like sheep . . . we like sheep. We like sheep . . . we like sheep.” Until finally Frederic turned to Sylvia and muttered, “I like sheep too, but not that much.”

This is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, the psalm for the day is the 23rd Psalm and the gospel lesson is from John 10 with its images of Jesus as the good shepherd.

And every year on this Sunday, worship leaders in urban and suburban congregations struggle with how to help both children and adults identify with this image. We like sheep, but not that much. We do not really know that much about sheep and what it takes to shepherd them. Yet strangely, we *do* know what it means to say, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Any pastor will tell you that when families plan a funeral for a loved one, nine times out of ten the families will choose the 23rd Psalm for a reading. Why? One reason may be, sadly, that it is the one text of the Bible they know. Another reason may be the imagery of still waters and green pastures and the Lord’s presence in the valley of the shadow of death. Whatever the reason, even if they have never met a sheep or a shepherd, they know the meaning of “The Lord is my shepherd.”

I

It is no surprise that the image of the shepherd was used frequently by Jesus in his earthly teaching. It was a part of his heritage and culture. Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was the keeper of great flocks of sheep. Moses, the great leader who went down to Egypt, challenged the Pharaoh, and led the Hebrews out of slavery was called to his task while shepherding, tending the flocks

of his father-in-law, Jethro. David, the greatest king of the Jewish nation, was a shepherd boy when God had him anointed for service. So when Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd," the Jews of the first century knew the image.

But when Jesus said, "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep," they no doubt thought he was speaking metaphorically. Then came the cross, and they realized: Jesus *is* the shepherd who gave his life for his sheep.

When the writer of First Peter told those persecuted and suffering Christians that by Christ's wounds they had been brought back to God, like wandering sheep returned to their shepherd, they got it, they understood.

II

But do we understand, really, what it means to be sheep of the Good Shepherd? Have you ever been troubled by that biblical injunction, that passage in Matthew 25, that calls for separating the sheep from the goats?

We know from texts such as those for today that Christians should strive to be counted among the sheep. We do not want to be the goats, with their mischievous and wily ways. They represent the lost, the unredeemed. We want to be the sheep.

But the problem with that analogy is that being identified as sheep is hardly complimentary. Sheep are not very smart. Sheep concentrate on doing one thing, grazing. They seldom look up. They will walk off a cliff or into a raging river and even into the jaws of a wolf without realizing that their lives are at risk.

Goats do not need anyone to watch out for them. They are independent, to the point of being head-strong. But sheep, sheep need a flock and a shepherd, not simply for convenience, but for their lives' sake.

Perhaps that is why we are identified as sheep. We need each other. We need the flock, our community, as our fold for survival. We have a shepherding program in this congregation. Members are divided into flocks, and each flock has a leader. The leaders of the flocks are to model care for their flocks after the model of the Good Shepherd.

But sometimes we get mixed up and think that the pastor is the model shepherd and the rest of us are the sheep. I have saved over the years a cartoon as a reminder. It shows a congregation in worship. In the pews there are rows and rows of sheep. Standing behind the pulpit is a big shaggy dog. About four rows back, one sheep is turned to another sheep saying, "We thought we were getting a shepherd, but all we got was this shaggy sheep dog."

There is only one good shepherd, Jesus. The rest of us are sheep dogs sometimes, sheep most of the time. And what we need to survive all of the time, all the days of our lives, is to stay with the flock, so that we are guarded and protected. Independent, self-reliant goats may graze alone, but sheep need the security of the flock and a relationship with the Shepherd.

III

And I do not care how well you think you know this Good Shepherd. You do not know him until you realize that he is a pursuing shepherd. The sixth and last verse of Psalm 23 says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." The Hebrew word used there for follow is also the word for pursue. Goodness and mercy do not just follow, they pursue us.

You see there is a difference between being followed and being pursued. There is a difference between looking back over your shoulder and seeing a predictable goodness with mercy trudging up the hill behind you and being trailed and tracked down by goodness and mercy that chases and finds you no matter where, no matter what the circumstances.

There were times, more than I want to admit, when I followed my children, several feet back in the shadows, as they walked into the school and down the hall to the classroom on that first day. Times when I drove through the parking lot at the school or at the first job site to make sure the car was there and that he or she got there safely and on time.

And then there were times when I pursued, racing across the yard to snatch a toddler before she got to the highway, jumping into the deep end to pull out a swimmer who was in trouble, driving eight hours to a college because an overwhelmed student sounded so desperate on the phone.

Of course, there were times when I should not have followed and I did. And times when I should have pursued, but I did not. But thank God, we have goodness and mercy.

Look back in your life, and you will see that like two sheep dogs, goodness and mercy have not simply followed you. Goodness and mercy, like persistent sheep dogs, have come looking for you, nipping at your heels, finding you wherever you have wandered, by the quiet restful waters, or in the darkest valley lost from the other sheep. And they have brought you home.

Conclusion

In a funeral service, there is a commendation that comes at the very end of the service just before the benediction. I have said it more times than I can possibly count.

After the celebration of the life, after the witness to the resurrection, before the benediction, the minister stands and says as the last words for this individual,

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant.

Acknowledge, we humbly pray,

a sheep of your own fold,

a lamb of your own flock,
a sinner of your own redeeming.
Receive this one into the arms of your mercy,
into the blessed rest of everlasting peace
and into the company of the saints in light.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday,
thank God for making you a member of the flock.
thank God for giving you a Good Shepherd.
Amen.