

Following the Shepherd's Voice

'Good Shepherd Sunday'

John 10:1-10 Psalm 23
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For centuries, this 4th Sunday in the 50-day season of Easter has been known by the name – *Misericordia Domini*. In Latin, that literally means “goodness of the Lord Sunday.” Officially, however, it goes by another name, “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Since ancient times, the Western church has used this occasion to invite congregations to encounter the risen Christ (the Sacred Presence of God) as the Good Shepherd – the Shepherd who is calling you and I by name and leading us into abundant life.

The shepherd metaphor is deeply woven into the language and the imagery of both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, God is often pictured as a Shepherd, and the Hebrew people as the sheep of God's flock. The most familiar example, of course, comes from the 23rd Psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters” (KJV). These words have served as a source of comfort for thousands of years. You may be less familiar with Ezekiel 34:15-16, “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak... I will feed them with justice.”

So, for centuries before Jesus the Hebrew people clearly identified God with the metaphorical image of a shepherd – the one who leads, guides, feeds, protects, and seeks the lost sheep of God's flock. Today, we're going to take a closer look at what the image of a shepherd entails. That begins with a short lesson in Greek, the language of the New Testament. The word used for “good,” *kalos*, as in ‘good shepherd’, also has the meaning of “genuine: or “model” or “true.” So, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is pictured not only as the good shepherd, but also as the genuine shepherd, the model shepherd, the true shepherd.

Yet, in today's reading the author also puts on the lips of Jesus, “I am the gate for the sheep.” How can Jesus be seen as both the gate to the sheepfold, and as the shepherd who leads the sheep in and out of the sheepfold. Let's just say that the author of the Gospel of John could never use enough metaphors to describe the nature and character of Jesus. Let's look at the gate imagery for just a moment.

The image of a gate can be somewhat problematic, especially for those of us claiming to be inclusive, and believe that God is a radically inclusive God, excluding no one – ever. A gate brings to mind something that separates those on the inside from those on the outside, for purposes of protection or privilege, or simply for making distinctions. For the past 2000 years this has been one of the interpretations of the image of Jesus as the gate. Unfortunately, some have gone further to demand that the *only* way to God and heaven is by believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, therefore, the *only* gate to the Divine.

Now, I do not doubt for a moment that historically, for the gospel writer (for John's community of faith), those who entered by the gate (in and through Christ) out of necessity had to close the gate on the part of God's flock that remained in the Jewish synagogue – those who, in essence, threw them out of the sheepfold first. During the infancy of Christianity, when it began to distinguish itself from Judaism, questions of exclusion and inclusion raged on both sides: who was in and who was out theologically, morally, and based on religious practices? It's disturbing that those questions still rage today.

I find it remarkable helpful, however, for each of us to spend some time reflecting upon Jesus as a gate to our own theological wanderings and journey of faith. Speaking personally, Jesus is for me the gate through which God is most fully known. That is a primary reason I still identify myself as a Christian. So yes, it is possible to see Jesus as your gateway to understanding the nature and character of God, without excluding others from being part of God's flock. It's about particularity, not exclusion.

Maybe we can look at it this way. Just as there are different breeds of sheep, distinguishable from one another, Christianity – as in following the ways and teachings of Jesus to understand God – is just one of many of those breeds of sheep. And Jesus being one gate among many. In other words, **there are those who find a different path and gate into God's inclusive love, grace, and Sacred Presence.**

Let's return, now, to a further explanation of the shepherd imagery. Verse 3-4 declares, "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him (the shepherd of the sheep), and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." I find this both comforting and disturbing.

It is a true comfort to know that God/Christ knows and calls us by name. **God's Sacred Presence in our lives can indeed be a personal and relational experience.** But it is often difficult, especially in trying times like these, when there is a cacophony of voices all screaming at us at the same time. So, notice the Bible also makes reference to "false shepherds" who lead sheep astray. Applying this to our own lives, biblical commentator Nancy Blakely writes:

There are many voices out there vying for our attention. Many distractions lure us from the path. Jesus promises that he will never let us go. His voice will bring us back. We belong to him. This is a strong word of reassurance to us in our struggles to be faithful.

In our choices each day as we practice our faith by saying yes to some voices and saying no to others, Jesus is there, going before us and leading us.

For instance, as you know the leadership of this congregation, our Session, has recently decided to **listen to the voices of reason and science as we try to navigate our way through this pandemic, especially concerning when and how to re-open the church.** That indicates that we have discerned that other voices, perhaps including many of our political leaders, especially those currently in the Executive Branch of our federal government, may (and I say may) be some of those false shepherds, leading some of the sheep astray. Know that we will continue seeking to faithfully discern where we believe Christ is leading us.

Sometimes in the midst of any crisis, however, when we most need to hear and heed the Good Shepherd, we can least discern his voice or find his gate, let alone see the Way ahead, the Shepherd's Way. So, as followers of this shepherd what can we find to help guide us? Don't be too surprised when I say: scripture and prayer. **It may help to recall, or refresh your memory of, those passages of scripture that have helped guide you in the past, especially in difficult times.** For example, here are some of mind. The Lord is my Shepherd. Be still and know that I am God. I will not leave you orphaned. God causes all things to work together for good. Do not be anxious about anything. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you...therefore, do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. And, come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. **What passages would you include on your list?**

And let us never forget the importance of community. **We are all learning and experiencing the power and need for community like never before.** We need the fellowship of one another, especially when we cannot be together in person during this time. So, for those of us who are starting to experience some zoom fatigue we need to hang in there, because most of us are making authentic connections and deepening relationships with others like never before. In fact, in and through these video calls, along with phone calls, even cards and letters, we may indeed be honing our ability to hear and follow the Shepherd's voice.

And let us remember the powerful promise found in John 10:10, explaining, in part, Jesus' mission and ministry. **"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Let us discern for ourselves, individually and as a community of faith, what that abundance really looks like, especially during this time of growing scarcity and separation.**

Never forget we are all part of the flock – God's flock, a flock that God continues to gather together – one way or another.

Amen.