

We Need a Good Shepherd

‘Good Shepherd Sunday’

John 10:10b-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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A special name has been used throughout the centuries to designate this particular Sunday in the season of Easter – *Misericordia Domini*. Have any idea what it means? Those of you with a Catholic background, or those who have had some Latin may have a clue. “Domini” is the word for Sunday. “Misericordia” means the “goodness of the Lord.” So literally, this is “The Goodness of the Lord Sunday.” However, it officially has another meaning – “Good Shepherd Sunday.”

Since ancient times, the Western church has used this occasion during the fifty days of the Easter Season (the time between Easter Sunday and the Day of Pentecost) to invite congregations to encounter the risen Christ as the Good Shepherd – the Shepherd who is calling us 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, God is often pictured as a Shepherd, and the Hebrew people as 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 deep 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.” And there are several other references in the Old Testament, especially in other Psalms. A reference to the coming Messiah in Isaiah 40 declares, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are young.”

In addition to a reference to God, the leaders of the Hebrew people are also sometimes described as shepherds of God’s flock. Before David became king, he actually was a shepherd. This fact may have served as the source of inspiration for using this image. Yet, most references to humans as shepherds come as words of warning. From the prophet Jeremiah: “Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture.” I could go on and on about the bad shepherds in our midst, in church, society, and certainly in government, who have manipulated and oppressed others in and through the abuse of their authority. I’ll say something about that in a moment.

The shepherd imagery was carried over into the New Testament. The author of the Gospel of John, writing some 60-70 years after the death of Jesus, transferred this imagery by calling Jesus the Good Shepherd. This was done to intentionally connect Jesus’ role as a shepherd with God’s role as a shepherd.

The Greek word used for “good,” *kalos*, also has the meaning of “model” or “true.” Jesus is pictured, then, as the model shepherd, the true shepherd, not just the morally good shepherd. Let’s take a closer look at what the image of a shepherd

entails. Most of us have probably seen a painting or stained glass window of Jesus lovingly holding a small lamb in his arms while a flock of cute fluffy sheep graze near his feet in a beautiful field. This romanticized picture of shepherding, however, isn't anything close to realistic. Rather, it was a dangerous, risky, dirty, and menial job. **So just what does a shepherd do?** A good shepherd is one who leads and guides the sheep from one pasture and source of water to another, makes sure they are adequately fed, protects the sheep from any predator, cares for their ailments, and keeps them gathered together, seeking out any and all sheep who get lost. A good shepherd, we're told, puts the well-being of the sheep first and foremost, to the point of laying down his life for the sheep. The author of the gospel of John was making an intentional reference to Jesus.

We are also told something about sheep, that they know the voice of the shepherd, just as he knows them. It is even believed that sheep consider their shepherd as part of the family, developing a strong bond and relationship. There is a reference to that in a passage from John, "I know my own and my own know me" (v. 14).

As mentioned before, the scriptures make 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.

One of the hardest tasks we face in life, including a life of faith as individuals and as a community of faith, is trying to discern what we perceive to be the voice of God from all the other competing voices in our society, and all the other voices in our own heads. From a pastoral perspective we are also reminded that Jesus seeks out the lost, those in need of being rescued. That may indeed include ourselves, you and me. As those called to continue this pastoral ministry begun by Jesus, part of our mission, then, is to reach out to the lost and hurting that we encounter along the way. This leads us to take very seriously the role of the shepherd to gather the flock together.

In just two weeks, on May 9, Mother's Day, we will have a re-union of in person worship here in our sanctuary after 14 months apart. It will be the beginning of a careful and cautious process of gathering the scattered flock back together. (And that will include those who will be watching on our YouTube channel.) What will that reunion look like? I don't know if anyone can rightly predict that until it happens. What will that reunion feel like? Hopefully, like a homecoming filled with joy. Perhaps like the prodigal son when he returned home.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, then, we are reminded that this can be a powerful image for us – who hunger for connection in a society that values individualism and secularism. **In the past year of living through a devastating and life-altering pandemic, perhaps it was the Good Shepherd all along that responded to our deepest yearnings for community by offering an alternative to our fears, separation,**

insecurities, and in our moments of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and for some, depression and anxiety.

Perhaps now more than ever, we need a Good Shepherd, a true shepherd. And let us remember the powerful promise found in John 10:10, which explains, 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 life *really* looks like. And never forget we are all part of the flock – God's flock, a flock that God continues to gather together – one way or another, perhaps even through reconciliation.

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Word Biblical Commentary