

The Shepherd from the Perspective of the Sheep

John 10:14, 22-30

Psalm 23

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The pastor was giving the children's sermon, and he told them that the word "Pastor" means "Shepherd". And so he explained to the children that the pastor is supposed to be like a shepherd for the people, who are the sheep for whom he is supposed to care. He then put this question to them: "What does the shepherd do for the sheep?" One of the little girls raised his hands and answered, "He fleeces them."

Sometimes children demonstrate a wisdom that is well beyond their years! Fortunately, the Bible presents us with a different image of the shepherd. And it really is fortunate that the image is different, because the image of the shepherd is the metaphor that the Bible uses to describe who God is.

The truth is, though, most of us don't really relate to the image of sheep and shepherd—it's just not in the bank of our experience for most of us. I mean, I've seen sheep at petting zoos, and I've had the occasional leg of lamb for dinner, and I wear wool sweaters that keep me warm but I also find them itchy; apart from all that, I really don't know much about sheep and shepherds.

And yet the images of sheep and shepherd are so prominent throughout Scripture that we really must find a way of understanding, so that we can appreciate the full meaning of the metaphors as they relate to God and to us. Every year the fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday, in which the psalm for the week is the 23rd Psalm, and the Gospel lesson comes from the 10th chapter of John, where Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. And if we take the metaphor to its logical conclusion, then we don't stop at describing the Lord as our Shepherd, for a shepherd cannot be a shepherd without sheep. So if we are to embrace the biblical image that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then we must also embrace the notion that we are sheep.

On this Sunday it would serve us well to ask, If we are the sheep, then just who is this Good Shepherd we called to follow?

Shepherding takes unbelievable commitment and sacrifice. For someone to be a shepherd requires that that person give their all for the welfare of the flock. It is a 24/7 commitment of self.

Phillip Keller was a prolific Christian writer who was also a pastor; however, he was not a pastor in the pulpit sense of the word, but in the literal Latin sense of the word: he spent many years as a shepherd and farmer in mission work around the world. It was out of his experiences and observations as a shepherd that he wrote books commenting on the meaning of the shepherd and sheep metaphors in the Bible.

Keller noted that the kinds of idyllic images you see in the 23rd Psalm don't come without significant effort on the part of the shepherd. A sheep doesn't simply find still waters or green pastures or safety in the midst of dark shadows unless the shepherd has poured himself into his work to provide such things for the sheep. The self-giving and sacrifice required by the shepherd in order for the sheep to enjoy the kind of peaceful, abundant living portrayed by the 23rd Psalm is immense. Describing his own sense of duty toward his sheep, Keller said this:

“all my life, all my strength, all my energy, all my vitality was poured into my flock. It simply had to be so if they were to enjoy an optimum life under my management. The ‘life’ which [the sheep] had in such rich measure and overflowing abundance was but an expression of my own life continuously given to them day after day. The lush green pastures, the lovely wooded parkland where they could shelter from summer sun and winter winds, the clear cool water to slake their thirst, the freedom from predators or rustlers, the protection against disease and parasites of all sorts, the loving attention and intimate care of one who delighted in their on-going well-being all reflected my own life lived out through them.”¹

Keller wasn't bragging about himself. He was simply describing the kind of commitment a shepherd must have in order to ensure the welfare of the flock.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He has given himself completely to the task of watching over us, of giving us real life, abundant life. His is a wholehearted commitment to you and to me, to provide and protect and be present with us always.

The Shepherd knows his sheep, says Jesus. If you and I were to come across a flock of sheep, for the most part we wouldn't be able to tell the sheep apart. Sure, some might have some distinctive markings that helps us identify them, but apart from that we wouldn't know the difference between the sheep. But the shepherd knows the sheep in the flock. The shepherd knows their personalities. The shepherd knows which sheep are stronger and which need more care. The shepherd knows which sheep are more prone to wander, and which are the ones who lag behind. The shepherd knows which sheep are young, and which ones are old. The shepherd knows the sheep by name, and every detail of their lives. The sheep are not just a commodity for the shepherd; they are the reason the shepherd lives every day.

This being a census year, everybody is interested in numbers around the nation. The story is told of an earlier census when a man was going door to door to count residents in each home. He came to one house and was met at the door by a woman who was obviously frazzled by the demands of all the children the census taker could hear in the background. The census taker asked, “How many people live in this house?” The woman replied, “Well, let's see. There's Nathan, and there's Leslie, and there's Josh and Christy...” The census taker became impatient and interrupted the woman: “I don't need names, just numbers.”

¹ Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at the Good Shepherd and the Sheep*, in Phillip Keller: The Inspirational Writings, (New York: Inspirational Press, 1993), pp. 408-409

“Mister,” replied the woman, “In this house the children aren’t numbers—they’re names.”

You and I are not a number to Jesus. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep. He knows us by name. He knows each one individually.

The Shepherd knows his sheep, and his sheep know him. The passage in John’s gospel takes place in mixed company. Jesus is with his disciples, and Jesus is also with his enemies. His enemies don’t understand what Jesus is saying. And Jesus says that’s to be expected, for they are not his sheep.

Sheep know their own shepherd. They are only comfortable in the presence of their shepherd. All other voices will scare the sheep, and they will scatter. But the voice of their own shepherd is one that draws them together. It is the only voice they will heed.

An American tourist was traveling in the Middle East. He came upon several shepherds whose flocks had all gathered together around a large watering hole. After an exchange of greetings, one of the shepherds turned toward the sheep and called out, “Manah. Manah. Manah.” (Manah means, “follow me” in Arabic.) Immediately his sheep separated themselves from the rest and followed him.

Then one of the two remaining shepherds called out, “Manah, Manah,” and his sheep left the common flock to follow him. The traveler then said to the third shepherd, “I would like to try that. Let me put on your cloak and turban and see if I can get the rest of the sheep to follow me.”

The shepherd smiled knowingly as the traveler wrapped himself in the cloak, put the turban on his head and called out, “Manah, Manah.” The sheep did not respond to the stranger’s voice. Not one of them moved toward him.

You see, the sheep know their shepherd. The voice of the shepherd is the only voice they will heed.

My friends in Christ, we are here today as sheep. That’s not really a point that we can debate. But what is significant is, Who is your shepherd? In a world that clamors for our attention and our loyalty, whose voice do you heed?

The Shepherd knows his sheep and his sheep know him. This is a kind of knowing that comes only when the shepherd and the sheep dwell in constant communion. Sheep can know their shepherd only when they listen, when they follow, when they are with their shepherd. For you and me, the implication is clear: what kind of time do we spend with our Shepherd? How well can we know the Shepherd simply by coming to church every so often on Sundays? The truth is it must be a way of life for us, to be with Jesus and he with us, if we are to know him as the sheep know their shepherd.

And so as sheep we must follow. The relationship between sheep and shepherd is not complete until the sheep follow the shepherd. The shepherd knows the sheep, and the sheep know the shepherd. The shepherd has shown himself to be the one who will provide and care and guide—he is the one who will see to it that the sheep will live.

One of the things that differentiates sheep from other livestock is that the sheep are led, not prodded from behind. To make livestock move by prodding them from behind is to push them where they don’t want to go. But when the sheep hear the voice of the one who cares for them, the voice they trust, they will follow.

So what do the Christ’s sheep do when they hear the voice of their Shepherd who knows them, who has given his life for them?

They follow. We follow.

Following is our response to the voice of the Shepherd. Following is our response to the gift of eternal life. Following is believing: "To believe in Christ is more than merely giving mental assent to his truth... To believe in Christ is to fully accept both Him and His truth so that [we] actually take [Christ] into [our] lives in deliberate, volitional action that goes on continuously."² Following is a commitment to live our lives in the way of Christ.

Following is the response that makes the words of the psalm your own words: The Lord is my Shepherd...

And here is where the metaphor begins to change a bit: In the animal kingdom, sheep don't really have the freedom to choose their shepherd.

But you do. You have the freedom to choose which voice you will heed. You have the freedom to choose your shepherd.

Choose the Good Shepherd. Amen.

² Keller, pp. 403-404.