

Sermon for May 7, 2017 "Being Sheep"

Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

The story goes that back in the 1980's there was this protest at a large university by the Arab students. The students all gathered in their ethnic dress. They were wearing white robes and white head coverings. The president of the University came out to address the group and assure them that their concerns were being addressed. When he looked out at all those students dressed in white he said, "You look like a bunch of sheep." The Arab students were highly offended.

Now you or I may not see that remark as offensive. But the Arab students did because they knew what sheep were like. Herding sheep was a major lifestyle in their culture. They knew that sheep are basically dumb animals. Sheep are completely dependent on their shepherds. The students thought the university president was saying that they were all dumb animals.

It's not the sheep's fault. That's the way they were bred. Sheep have been domesticated for so long that their natural instinct for survival has been bred out of them. They are unable to care for themselves in the wild. That's why they depend on the shepherd.

Psalm 23 says the Lord is our shepherd. Jesus speaks of himself as a good shepherd. If the Lord is our shepherd then that means we are the sheep. Please don't be offended, but you all look like a bunch of sheep, or at least the Bible says you ought to look like a bunch of sheep. So how are we like sheep? What does it mean to beeeee sheep?

Obviously from our readings the shepherd and the sheep have a relationship. Jesus speaks of the shepherd calling his sheep. Sheep have no instinct for living in the wild, but they have an instinct for following their shepherd's voice. They will come when they hear their shepherd and run when they hear another voice. They have an innate trust of the people who care for them. Often times several shepherds would keep their sheep together and one shepherd could come and call his own to himself

So the sheep know their Shepherd and they are loyal to her or him. But the shepherd also knows the sheep. Jesus says that the shepherd knows the sheep by name and calls them by name. I can't help but think of the story of Mary Magdalene at the resurrection. When she saw the empty tomb she thought Jesus' body had been stolen. In her confusion she ran right into the Lord but she mistook him for the gardener. It wasn't until he called her name that she realized it was Jesus and he was alive.

Do you know your shepherd's voice? You have to be listening to it to recognize it. How do we hear our shepherd's voice? In scripture, in the writings and hymns and songs of our faith, in prayer... When you pray do you allow times of silence to listen to the Lord?

You need to spend time learning your shepherd's voice. A thief or a false shepherd may come along. If we don't know our shepherd's voice we might follow a false shepherd. The false shepherd comes to steal the sheep. Take time to cultivate the relationship you have with the Lord – learn to recognize his voice.

From these passages we also learn that the sheep are protected and delivered by the shepherd. In this passage Jesus says “I am the gate to the sheepfold.” So is Jesus mixing his metaphors here? Just a second ago he said he was the shepherd and now he’s the gate? It was common practice for the shepherd to lie across the doorway into the fold. So the shepherd became the gateway into the fold. Anything or anyone going in or out had to go by him.

This means two things. First the shepherd keeps things and people out of the fold that could harm the sheep. The shepherd protects the sheep. Psalm 23 says “Thy rod and they staff they comfort me.” The staff would be used to beat off wild animals. The second thing it means is that through Jesus we enter the fold. He has provided a way in. Through his coming in the flesh, his life, death and resurrection, Jesus made a way for us to know God. We have access to God through Jesus the gate.

Jesus is the good shepherd who delivers and protects his fold. But you have to be in the fold. Are you in the fold? Jesus is the gate. Being a member of a church is not the gate – it is a good way to be a faithful member of a fold but it is not the way. Jesus is the way. Just coming to church is not the gate. Again it is a good way to follow the shepherd. But Jesus is the gate. If you want the Lord to deliver and protect you as your shepherd, come through Jesus, he is the gate into the fold.

The benefits of this relationship and of being part of the fold are many. Because the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. The Lord will provide for all our needs. That doesn’t mean that Christians do not suffer from time to time. But God is with us through those times of suffering. He will lead us to green pastures and still waters. He will restore our souls.

Because the Lord is my shepherd I am protected and cared for. His rod and his staff they comfort us. Our shepherd protects us from wild animals that would devour us. Later in John, Jesus says that the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Our shepherd did die for us.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil. Our shepherd is there with us through the dark times of our lives. He is even with us sustaining us in the face of our enemies. He anoints our heads with oil; our cups overflow. Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my live and I shall dwell in the house of the lord forever, because the Lord is my shepherd.

Do you look like a bunch of sheep? Do you know the voice of your shepherd? Do you come when he calls? Would you flee from a false shepherd no matter how nice his or her voice sounded? Are you in the fold?

You know sheep have a bad habit of wandering off. The Shepherd takes them to a green pasture. And they begin peacefully grazing. They don’t look up and they just graze their way away from the shepherd. But the shepherd comes looking for the lost sheep.

Is the Lord your shepherd? If not come in through Jesus the gate to the sheep fold. If the Lord is your shepherd, then listen to your shepherd and follow his voice. If the Lord is your shepherd; you shall not want and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!