

“The Shepherd We Need”

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

If you were to sit down and make a list of the many images found in the Bible, from which Jesus teaches us about himself, you'd have a hard time coming up with one more common to his day and one more applicable to ours than that of a shepherd who cares for his sheep.

Now, maybe that sounds a bit strange (if not questionable), given the fact that we don't have too many shepherds and sheep running around in Silicon Valley. There are a number of CEO's, quite a few Office Managers, and more than enough workers who carry out the tasks. Once in a while, we see a few deer in the hills; a raccoon or an opossum wandering around. Believe it or not, we had a wild pig on our street (a while back) and a couple of turkeys that were doing their turkey thing. (Whatever that is?) But you're not going to find too many sheep-herders and certainly not many sheep.

Add to that the fact that most of us don't want to be like sheep, anyway. The idea of a meek, rather unintelligent animal being shepherded around - who in the world wants to be like a sheep? Who in (our world) would set that as a goal for their life?

Can you imagine going to college and majoring in becoming a sheep? It wasn't happening. (It still isn't.) The trouble is that back then (and even today) the description fits more than we might realize.

Who among us is not being led around and influenced by pressures of all kinds? Television, advertising, social media, government, politics; peer pressure, work relations and demands, go down the list; sports, weekend activities, money, power, staying up with and maybe even (ahead of) everyone else?

We like to think we're independent, and to a degree we are. But we're still part of the flock, and even when we do manage to escape from it (now and then) it can have both good and bad results. Little wonder the Bible uses the imagery quite often. Little wonder it's an imagery we need to remember even today.

Just think for a moment, about how central this shepherding imagery really was. In the Old Testament, before he became the father of a great nation, Abraham was “the keeper of great flocks.” Before he was called (by God) to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses, for his father-in-law, Jethro, was “a tender of sheep.” Young David, who became the greatest of all Old Testament kings, was a shepherd boy before ever taking the throne.

It's the same with the prophets. Isaiah says when the Messiah comes, he will “feed his flock like a shepherd...He will gather his lambs into his arms.” Ezekiel says there will be “one shepherd...and there will be one flock.” Zechariah prophecies of that day when they will “strike the shepherd and the sheep of the fold will scatter.”

In the psalms, it's no different. “We are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.” “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

So it is that the image of a shepherd and his sheep was common to the history and the culture of Jesus' day. And so it is that Jesus picks up on this same imagery and gives to us one of the most powerful descriptions we'll ever have of who he is and what he has done.

(Remember the story?) Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep...The hired hand (he says) is not the shepherd who owns the sheep...I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me.”

Now, maybe this first point today is obvious, but when Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd, the implication is that there are shepherds in this world that are not good. Jesus says there are those who claim to be shepherds, who claim to care deeply about the ones they're called to lead. But when the troubles of this life come, (he says), when the rubber of this life hits the road, so do they, those who are the false shepherds, who care little about their sheep.

There's a lot of talk these days about putting a new face on the twenty dollar bill. I don't know what you think of all of that. It's a curious debate, whose picture it should be. I can't say I have much invested in that discussion; no pun included.

One of the side articles (to this dollar bill debate) was about counterfeit money. (It was interesting to read.) Not that I was thinking about doing anything with it, but it was interesting. The article said there are more than a dozen different characteristics that can reveal a bill as being a fake. It said that, for the most part, unless you know what you're looking for, there's no simple way to tell which is real. It went on to say (however) that to the trained eye, to the one who knows what to look for, there are some basic differences that can easily give the counterfeit bill away.

Now, we're not talking (here today) about dollar bills. We're talking about shepherds and sheep. But dollar bills aren't the only thing in this life that can be a fake. Jewelry can be a fake. Antiques can be a fake. Paintings can be a fake. People can be a fake. (Have you noticed that?) You can fake an illness. You can fake self-confidence. You can fake being secure in this life. You can turn almost anything that is genuine into something that's not. Unless your eye is trained, it's not always easy to figure out which is real.

In the text today, Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." He says there's nothing fake in what he brings. And (he says) there's a test you can apply that can reveal the difference. There's a way you can know whether or not the shepherd you're following is real. And (he says) it's simple. It's what happens "when the wolf comes."

When the wolf comes (he says), the impostor runs away. And he runs away because he's not a true shepherd. He's an impostor. He's a hired hand. He's little more than a fake. And he cares little, if any, about the sheep. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." He says, "The Good Shepherd will never abandon those for whom he cares."

Now, let me ask you a question, and this is a bit of an aside (for a moment); might seem a bit random. Do you know the difference between a cow and a sheep? (Besides the obvious... You're thinking, "Pastor Dan has lost it! He's finally figured out there's a difference!") Do you know the difference between a cow and a sheep? Cows are led from the back. Sheep are led from the front. You push a herd of cows in the right direction. You lead a flock of sheep where you want them to go.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd." He says, "I'm not going to push you. I'm not going to force you down a certain path." But He says, "I'm the real deal. I'm not a fake, an impostor. I'm not a hired hand. And I'll lead you where you need to go. I'll make sure you end up where you need to be."

Now, we've talked about this before. You and I live in a day and age when people are searching in countless directions for the right path in life to follow. They're looking for guidance, for direction, especially when it comes to their spiritual life. And they're following anyone willing to lead. They're going off in a variety of directions, even when they're not sure where they'll end up!

The trouble is that there are wolves along the path. There are times and places and people that will separate the real from the fake. And when that happens, there'll be no one left to follow, and there'll be no path left that is secure.

Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." And he says "you will not be in want; he'll lead you beside still waters; he'll make sure your path is secure. And there's nothing, (he says) that will separate the Good Shepherd from his sheep."

That's the first thing we find. He's the real deal. He's not a fake. The second is that the Good Shepherd knows the sheep by name. He knows who they are. Jesus said, "I know my own, and my own know me." (He said), "I have other sheep that are not of this pen. I must bring them also. And they, too, will listen to my voice...and there'll be one flock and one Shepherd."

Now, again, we're talking about shepherds and sheep. I don't know how much you know about sheep. (All I know is what I've read.) From what I've read, being compared to a sheep isn't a flattering comparison. Sheep aren't very smart. They easily become lost. They wander and they stray and they forget where they are and where they're supposed to be. (Maybe that's why Jesus used this comparison?) I'll let you be the judge.

It's true. Sheep aren't very smart. (There are a lot of things they don't know.) What they do know is the shepherd's voice. What they do know is when and where their shepherd calls.

A number of years ago, Mary and I had a chance to visit the Holy Land. I still remember (one day), the watering hole (we saw), out in what seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. There were four flocks of sheep all around the same well. I remember wondering how the shepherds would ever figure out whose sheep was whose.

The bus we were traveling on stopped and let us watch. It was fascinating. It turned out to be rather easy, because the sheep knew the shepherd's voice. And it happened, (one flock at a time). The shepherds

would begin to call, and the sheep would begin to separate. And they'd follow where their shepherd walked, and they'd figure out which sheep belonged to which one. And it worked. I was amazed. The sheep knew the shepherd's voice. They heard the voice of their shepherd when he called.

Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." He says, "I know my own, and my own know me...and there will be one flock," he says, "and there'll be one Shepherd who calls." And not one who strays, Jesus says, will be lost.

Now, you tell me. How many voices are there in this world, calling out for us to follow? How many voices (calling us to follow), who know little if anything about who we are?

Jesus knows who you are. He knows everything about your life. And he's calling you to follow. He's calling you by name.

Have you ever felt like a number in this world, like your real identity was something that didn't matter? I was the phone this past week, trying to get an answer to a simple question. I had to enter in five different sets of numbers before getting a real person on the other end! And when I did, actually was able to talk to someone who was real, the first thing they asked me to do was to verify a number!

It's like the woman in the orphanage talking to the census taker. "How many people live in your home (he asked)?" She started naming them. "There's Lydia, and there's Mary, and there's Jonathan, and there's Jose, and there's Francis, and there's Anna..." And before she could finish, the man said "I don't need all their names. I only need to know the number." The woman said, "I don't know the number. All I know is their names."

Now, Jesus knows the number. (Even the hairs on your head are known by God.) More importantly, he knows your name, and he's calling. He's the Good Shepherd, and he wants you to follow and to trust. The question is "Are you listening?" The question is, "Are you paying attention to his voice?"

Jesus as the Good Shepherd is the real deal. (He'll never lead you astray.) Jesus as the Good Shepherd knows your name. (He's calling you to follow, because he truly does care about your life.) And Jesus as the Good Shepherd loves his sheep, so much so that he willingly gave his life.

Now, again, I'm not a shepherd. I know little about sheep. What I do know is that it was the shepherd's job to care for them and to keep them safe. And so, even at night, when the sheep would enter the pen, the shepherd's job was to lie at the gate and to make sure no animal would come and cause them harm. But if an animal did come, it would have to first pass the shepherd. It was the shepherd's job to not let it happen. And so, from time to time, there were stories about shepherds who had given their life in an attempt to protect the sheep.

Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." He says, "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." In fact, I don't know if you noticed it or not, but five times in the few verses we read, we find Jesus talking about laying down his life. Five times, (he says) "the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And two of those times, he says, "I lay it down...only to take it up again."

What's he talking about? (I think it's obvious.) First, he's talking about the cross, and about how he willingly, as our Good Shepherd, gave his life that we might have ours.

And second, Jesus is talking about what happened on Easter, and about how he took up his life again. On the third day, Jesus came back to life.

The amazing thing is, and this is how I'd like to close, that when it comes to Jesus, to the good news of what he has done for us, not only is he the Good Shepherd (the one who cares for the sheep), but he becomes the lamb (the one who was sacrificed) to pay the price.

In the saving plan of God, the Shepherd becomes the sheep. The one who protects becomes the one whose life is taken away. The one called to watch over the flock (and to make sure it is safe) is also the one who willingly dies that the sheep might live.

It's a powerful image we've been given, common to Jesus' day, and more than applicable to ours. It's also more than an image, because it's built on and around the truth of who Jesus is and what he has done.

He's the real deal. He knows your name. And he gave his life and took it up again, that you and I might live. "The Shepherd we need." The Savior we have. It's time to follow. Amen.