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Good Shepherds, Good Sheep

Text: St. John 10:1-18

I am a city boy, and despite having spent time in the country and in rural areas there are a lot of things I don't understand about rural life. This was proved to me several years ago when Brenda and I were touring England with her brother and sister-in-law. Inevitably, when coming upon some grand historical house that we intended to visit, as we drove into the vast park that surrounded the house we were greeted by the animal life that grazed in the park. It was not entirely clear to me, or to any of us for that matter, what the exact animal life was. Clearly there were some sheep, at least there were young lambs, easily identifiable by their woolly coats. However, in close proximity to the lambs there were somewhat larger animals that looked like sheep but without woolly coats. Those I pinned down as goats. My traveling companions insisted they were sheep. This argument went on for a number of days and in a number of grand houses. Finally, they pointed out to me that since the young lambs, whose identity was not in doubt by any of us, always stuck by the side of the larger animals and since the larger ones seemed to be taking care of the younger ones, that those larger animals were in fact the mothers of the lambs. Hence they were sheep, not goats. However, since in argument, I never give in easily, in short, because I am stubborn, I still maintained that they were goats since they looked like goats and didn't particularly look like the smaller lambs. When my companions then asked why goats would be hanging around protecting young lambs, I came up with what I thought was an irrefutable argument. These weren't just any old goats, I maintained; they were in fact *nanny* goats. It is now only many years later that I am willing to admit that they were, in fact, sheep; they had just been sheared recently and that was the reason they didn't have woolly coats.

Well, I may not be able to tell the sheep from the goats with respect to barnyard animals, but still I do know something about theological sheep and goats, as do all Christians. We all especially know about sheep and also about shepherds. Few Christians do not know the 23rd psalm, and many find it one of the most important passages of scripture in their lives. In times of confusion, at times when they most feel like sheep on wild hills, when they are threatened by whatever wolves threaten human life, when they feel most without a direction of their own, to say that “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul” is to find comfort indeed. It is to find protection, and to find the deepest sort of comfort knowing there is a shepherd leading us in paths of righteousness, one who is with us, protecting us and comforting us with his rod and staff.

The image of the shepherd tending and protecting the flock is one that is at the very heart of Christian experience. We prove it time and time again whenever we return to the 23rd psalm. This psalm is how we think about God. It is how we have always thought about God. It is small wonder that in the ancient church, the earliest portrayals of Jesus were not of the cross, but were portrayals of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, a young beardless youth carrying a lamb on his own shoulders. In a time of persecution when the Roman wolves were indeed coming after the sheep, it was this shepherd who alone protected them; it was this good shepherd who knew his sheep, this was the good shepherd who kept the flock together and made them one.

It is difficult to overestimate how important the notion of a good shepherd was to the ancient church and to Israel before her. When Jesus claimed to be the good shepherd he was not being particularly inventive; he was drawing on an image that was well known not only because of the twenty-third psalm, but one that had been thoroughly scouted by the prophets in a way that

ran deep into the very way that life was lived and should be lived in Israel. Israel, of course, had at its roots been a nomadic people for whom moving with flocks was a way of life. It was only natural therefore to talk not only about God as Israel's shepherd, it was natural to talk about Israel's kings, who were charged with the welfare of this people, as shepherds. But as the prophets saw it, therein was also a profound contrast. Although the kings were to act as shepherds, they were not always very good ones. In fact, they were often terrible, and more like ravaging wolves. Rather than caring for the sheep, they either abandoned them or fed on them. The prophet Ezekiel, for example, openly criticized the shepherds of Israel who "eat the fat, clothing themselves in the wool, slaughtering the fatlings." Rather than feeding the sheep, they fed on them; according to the prophet, "they have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured, sought the lost or brought back the strays." And for that greedy, self-interested failure to be good shepherds, Ezekiel declared that God was against the shepherds, and would personally seek out the sheep to rescue them and feed them.

So when Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd he is drawing on a long and important prophetic tradition and is doing more than throwing out a comforting image. He is making a profound claim, for in calling himself the good shepherd he is saying point blank that he is the fulfillment of the prophetic word. He is saying that the time when God promised that the sheep would be rescued is now fulfilled. He is saying that when God promised that he himself would seek out the sheep and rescue them, that he himself is that God, and that he is their rescue. And in saying that, he is also saying one more thing: namely, that these rescued sheep, that we as Christ's church, have him as our shepherd and no other.

It is comforting to know that. But there is also another side to Jesus being our good shepherd that we also have to think about, namely, that we are sheep who need a shepherd, and

we need to hear the shepherd's voice and follow him. We need to come to grips with this, if we are to get the full import of what it means to call Christ the good shepherd.

An interesting thing about sheep is that they are animals who have no known defenses. They cannot outrun most animals; they do not have sharp teeth and claws. To survive at all, they depend on someone, something to protect them. While they can find decent forage themselves if it is nearby, they depend on another, a shepherd, to lead them to food and water when it is not nearby. Now, given these characteristics of sheep, despite talking about good shepherds, we actually do not like to be compared to sheep. To be sheep-like is to be without independent judgment, or without judgement at all for that matter. It is to be a herd-like animal, not an autonomous human being. To be sheepish is to be reduced to silence, often humiliated silence.

Yet there is something sheep-like about us, something more than we like to admit. Despite valuing independent judgment and individuality, we really depend on others to a great degree, and we depend upon shepherds to lead us and to give us guidance in life. Years ago, I was a faculty judge for a literary debate in a college fraternity. One of the young pledges was asked to get up and give an impromptu speech, and he chose to speak on independence. He asserted boldly that he was always his own man, and he did not ever want to be like anybody else or dependent on anybody. It was a bold and moving speech, although its irony seemed to have escaped him. For he was declaiming loudly on the virtues of independence when he had just endured two weeks of ritualistic humiliation, otherwise known as hazing, just for the privilege of joining this fraternity and wearing the same jacket as and being like twenty other guys. The really deep irony was that a good deal of his fearlessness and supposed independence came from the fact that he belonged to a group that thought of itself this way. The group would guide and protect him in his individualism.

We are rarely as independent as we like to think we are. Our identities very much depend upon the groups and communities to which we belong. Who we are is often made known by the friends we keep. We identify with others, particularly with others bigger than us. For example, we rejoice or sorrow depending upon whether our sports team wins or loses. We, of course, try to hide our dependency by calling the group something else and thinking that the name applies to us. No team or its fans has ever been called “The Sheep;” we instead prefer the names of predators and tough guys, such as “Eagles,” “Jaguars,” “Giants” and the like.

But sports is, of course, simply a minor example. What is far more to the point, and it is a biblical one, is the degree to which we depend on the judgement of others in political and social life for guidance. In a book published in 2002, Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* wrote a history of crises in the American presidency since Nixon, outlining the scandals of each administration and how each president weathered them, or not. Certain of these scandals such as Watergate and Iran-Contra were political and actually violated and threatened the constitutional health of the country. Others, such as Clinton’s affair, were moral. What Woodward concluded was essential for surviving a scandal was that a president be popular and that the perception exist in the country that it needs that particular shepherd. Thus in Iran-Contra, Reagan’s popularity and the threat of the Communists overrode defying and lying to congress; Clinton’s popularity and a booming economy let him escape. Few people liked Nixon so in the end he was dispensable. Moreover, whenever the country feels threatened and wants leadership the sitting president is always in an advantageous position. Whenever that happens, presidential approval polls almost always soar, and everybody supports the shepherd, pretty much no matter what he is doing, wise or foolish, just or unjust.

The point is that we are more sheep-like than we often like to think. We depend on

shepherds to lead us to water and forage; whenever we feel endangered, we rush to the shepherd and support him. But if that is the case, then one of the great decisions in life is not whether we need shepherds or not, but which shepherd we will follow, which shepherd's judgement we will rely on to discern good and evil, which shepherd's protecting hand we will rest under, which shepherd's voice we will listen to.

If this is the case, then let me say why Christ is *the* good shepherd. It is not because Christ is more powerful and can offer better protection. It is because of the very way that he describes the job of a shepherd, and it is very different way than the way by which most shepherds operate. This good shepherd works for the good of the sheep. He not only guards the sheep, he lays down his life for the good of the sheep. He is the sacrificial lamb that sits on the throne in heaven.

That is a striking thing to say. Why? Well, it may be true that a shepherd cares more for the sheep than a hireling who runs and leaves the sheep at the first sign of danger, or who preys on them himself. Still, it would seem that the ultimate job of a shepherd would be to fatten the sheep for fleecing and slaughter. Who, after all, hangs around sheep for the good of the sheep instead of the food and wool that they will bring their owner? It hardly seems credible that the shepherd actually works for the sheep. That is where Christ, the Good Shepherd, is different. He works for the good of the sheep. He is the sacrifice, not them.

That is how far he is willing to go for the sheep. He lays down his life for the sheep. Few shepherds will do that, although there have been instances of leaders who are willing to go very far for the good of their people; maybe there are some who would make this sacrifice. If there are, Christ is surely their model and measure.

But there is more to it than even that. For in the end, what the good shepherd of our lives

does is much more than protect and comfort us, his poor lambs. His love for us is something more than just protection and consolation. As Simone Weil once said, “love is not consolation, it is light.” The good shepherd does not just protect us, he shows us the way, and guides us in a way that will give us life. That is why we should listen to his voice.

Think here what it really means to be guided safely, what it means to be protected from ravaging wolves. It does not mean in the end that nothing bad will ever happen to us. A good shepherd, a really good shepherd, is not one who will keep us from getting sick, or keep us from disappointment in life, or even keep us from dying one day. A good shepherd, a really good shepherd is one who keeps us from losing our souls. If the kings of Israel were criticized by the prophets for not taking care of the flock it wasn't because they failed to be good political leaders or because they failed to maintain strong armies and military supremacy. It was because under their leadership people lost their souls as well as their lives. When Israel fell to the Assyrians and Judah to the Babylonians, it was because the people had lost their souls; they had lost the sense of real good and evil; they had lost the ability to tell truth from lies. In fact, they thought lies were nourishment and hope. They had lost the sense of what it meant to listen to and follow the God who had led them out of Egypt. They had lost the sense of what it meant to care for one's brothers and sisters. When that happened it hardly mattered whether they were ruled by Assyrians or Babylonians or kings of Israel for they were all the same.

The Good Shepherd is different. For not only does he go so far as to willingly lay down his life for the flock, in doing so he also teaches the flock what it means to be a good flock, what it means to be good sheep. He leads them in the way they need to go to have souls and to have life and to have light. As St. John writes, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us -- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone

who has the world's goods and sees a brother and sister in need and yet refuses help?" What makes the Good Shepherd really good is that he makes the flock good. And what makes the flock good is that it follows and does what the good shepherd does, and does what the shepherd says to do. It is a community where the shepherd's leadership is reflected in the way leadership is exercised in the community among its members. If the goodness of the tree is known by its fruit, so, too, who the real shepherd of the flock is known by the way that the community acts to each other and the world. That is something that is important for you to know whenever you think about the leadership of the church. It is important for you to know in being a member of Christ's flock.

That is where the choice has always been in the church. We are not protected by might or cunning; we are protected and guided by a self-giving goodness that comes from the One who is alone good, from the One who alone is willing to lay down his life for others so that they might flourish. The Lord is indeed our Shepherd, and we are the sheep of his fold, only if we act towards each other and the world, if we love each other, as he once loved us. If we do so love each other, then we will never have anything to fear while walking through the valley of the shadow of death.