

*Shepherds of the Good Shepherd*  
John 10:1-10

Sanctuaries are places like no other. I don't mean the stained glass or the wood fixtures or the sentimental memories or even the familiarity of the sameness. What I mean is not about the building at all. It is about the sanctuary.

The real reason we love this place and treasure this time we call worship is the sanctuary in it – the safety of awareness that Christ is not just risen, but with us in our here and now. The memories are about God's blessing, the gratitude that we all live in grace and providence, the friendship in a time of hardship or grief, the challenge of words spoken that helped us to be better, to live truer. When we open our lives and become transparent to God in a sanctuary, we realize that Paul was only half right. He remembered that Christ came to him and said, "My grace is sufficient for your need." Later Paul knew that Christ's grace was more than sufficient – it was boundless!

This sanctuary is our sheep pen. Being a sheep of the Good Shepherd is our safety. Psalm 23 is a song of thanksgiving for what the Shepherd Savior does for the sheep. We might be better off to spend more time each day naming the ways that we have seen green pastures, known the peace of stillness, had divine company in the walk in darkness, had tables prepared and so sufficient that we are really clueless about real hunger. We would want less and give more. Yes, we trust that goodness and mercy – and other things more than we deserve – are ours because of the Good Shepherd.

The gospel lesson today is the shepherd lesson we forget. Here in John, Jesus is not just separating sheep from goats; he is separating good sheep of his flock from other sheep. The good sheep "hear his voice." He goes ahead of them, and they follow. They will not run after strangers. They do not have to understand. They just have to trust and follow. So, good sheep listen and follow and don't run after bad shepherds who will rob them. Good sheep focus on the good that the shepherd has given, and trust that his goodness is good enough for them.

Other shepherds who lead other directions just want to rob us. Christ is the Good Shepherd. Christ is the only one who gives us real life, and the differently abundant life. When we follow shallow whims and superficial wishes that are always being put in front of us, we not only rob ourselves of deeper joys. We make the Good Shepherd's job harder. He comes back to find us lost. He dresses the wounds we get from diversions. He reminds us that *his* grace is more than sufficient for us.

After the resurrection and in this continuing season of the power of the risen Lord, we are beyond the lesson of the good sheep and the Good Shepherd. When we are alone, isolated, not in the fold or following together, we are just sheep. But when we are together, following together and working together we are changed by the power of the God who raised Christ to be Savior and Lord. We have the shepherd with us always. We do shepherd work wherever he leads us. We become shepherds of the Good Shepherd.

Look what happened to those followers in the first days when they thought they were sheep without a shepherd. They huddled, head-down in fear. They closed ranks so tight they could not

move in any direction. Their main question was a survive question: “What is going to happen to us now?”

Then they realized that Christ was risen *among them*. They trusted that he would be with them always. Fear became faith. Terror changed to trust. They became good sheep again. They listened, and they followed. They trusted, and they went to work. They were no longer sheep of the flock. They became shepherds of the Good Shepherd. They were his shepherds to the other sheep that were scattered. They trusted enough that their main question changed from the survive question to the thrive question: “Where is Christ leading, and what can we do for him?” And he led them where he promised – to the abundant life.

In recent days, this congregation has been through some dark valleys of the shadow, and you have waded through troubled waters. I’m not sure you have faced wolves, but you have certainly had reasons for fear. But you also have more reasons to trust the Good Shepherd.

Your Session is a very good body of shepherds who are working to follow the shepherd. The Session in the last months has communicated to you that we have financial stresses. At their meeting Wednesday night, they agreed together that we have to face this issue openly. They asked me to address these problems in worship, because treasure and heart are spiritual issues and they are critical.

Unless you have buried your head like sheep, you have read how we had to use reserves to cover a deficit in spending in 2009, and you have watched the operating fund deficit grow all this year in the weekly bulletin reports until we are \$10,000 behind for a quarter of the year. The Session is praying to be faithful managers of our ministry and finances, and they know that we cannot just delay and hope longer.

In the coming weeks, you are going to hear about ministry and money, about commitment and contributions. You will receive a newsletter with some detailed and direct explanation of the crisis we face, and you will receive a letter asking for your commitment – your financial commitment.

The short of it is this: Like many Presbyterian and other churches, this congregation has avoided attention to stewardship and talk about money for a good bit of its history. It has said it had a “faith budget.” But the truth is it had faith in generous givers who made up for a wider weakness in commitment among the flock. You hesitated to ask for commitment, especially financial commitment. In the last two or three years, we have lost four or five of those givers – and we have lost more than 20% of the contributions to the operating fund, about \$65,000 annually. On top of that, last year the three highest contributors accounted for another \$111,000, a third of the operating budget.

Not hearing the facts has given us a false sense of security that everything was all right. We have been content to be sheep instead of shepherds for the Good Shepherd. We may have not increased our gift to the church in a while, or we may have spread our charity giving in many directions. We may not have realized that the members of this body are the only people who can keep this body strong, and our first gift and our best effort needs to be pointed toward the work of Christ that we do here.

We are deeply grateful for people who direct their generosity – and let's not forget – their sacrifice toward Brenham Presbyterian. Many givers of different amounts have the offering in common of a commitment to this body of Christ. We will offer prayers of thanksgiving for the saints of the past and the saints in this sanctuary who give with generous hearts.

But for the rest of us, the best way we can honor their love for this church and their love for us is to follow their example. The only thanks they ask is to see this congregation thrive and serve and grow strong together as a band of shepherds that follows the Good Shepherd. They have followed, and part of the reason we are in a financial crisis is that some of us who could be more generous financially to this congregation have not looked to the church for our first gifts. Every one of you who give what you can faithfully are giving enough money already. The only thing more you might give is more prayers. But those of us who know we can give more to our church need to give more than prayers.

Of course, you should keep praying for your PNC. But the best thing you can do to attract a new pastor is show you face facts with faith. You do not need to solve all your problems or even cover them up or bury your heads and ignore them. All you need to do is demonstrate that you know you have problems and you have started working on them. Any pastor shepherd would love to work in a church that has faith to face the facts, and has gone to work on them.

I have said it several times: You are a stronger body than you sometimes admit, and you a wonderful collection of a lot of good members. You have strength of faith to face the facts. And you have a Good Shepherd to lead you. You can follow the example of the your own good shepherds right here.

The time to become shepherds who follow instead of sheep who huddle is NOW. The time has come for each one of us – every one of us – every member of the body of Christ to remember that Christ was a giver and calls us to give what we have received. Together, each of us and all of us, need to make an offering of our selves to the Lord and to this church in our attentiveness, our prayers, our participation, our serving, our giving of time and talents and treasure – because he said our treasure show him where our heart is.

It is time to realize what binds us together is not what we receive from the Shepherd but the fact that we all give back to him out of gratitude and commitment.

It is time to admit that all of us have a different capacity to make an offering, but none of us has a reason *not* to give an offering for the blessings we have received.

It is time to remember that some of us are in real need and cannot give, and others of us who are blessed can give for them.

It is time to realize that we have been living out of the blessings of a few, and the best way we can honor the saints who have gone before and the saints among us now is to follow their example.

It is time to face the truth that most of the people in this sanctuary have difficulties and problems and yes, financial stresses when we come through these doors. Each of us needs to think more about what we need to do than assume that there are always those who will make up for what we do not do.

It is time to have done with smallness, and petty self-centeredness, with thinking that the church is here for us.

It is time to expect more of ourselves than we require of others.

Hear the good news from the voice of the Good Shepherd: If we seek to do good for the Shepherd who laid down his life for us, surely we can trust that he will do more than supply our needs. If we just ask “Where is Christ leading, and what can we do for him?”, we will do more than survive. We will thrive! If we live the grace that is more than sufficient, we will shepherds at work for the Good Shepherd, and we will share that differently abundant life together.

### Prayers of the People

Lift up your heads and hearts and make an offering of prayers to a faithful Savior and Good Shepherd.

Offer your thanksgiving. Name of the places of abundance and blessing in your life, and place them before God.

Offer your trust. Tell the Shepherd that you will listen for his voice and follow after his leading.

Offer yourself to his work. Think of a talent you can give, time you can re-direct, treasure you can place on this Table where you remember what he gave for you.

Offer prayers of gratitude for generous spirits and devoted examples who have given their best to make us who we are today. Name the saints you may know who are here with God in spiritual encouragement and saints who sit on pews and work faithfully.

Pray for this congregation, that we will have courage. Pray for this Session of shepherd leaders, that they will have wisdom. Give thanks to God for your Session’s example of strength of face to face the financial facts.

Pray for other congregations who are facing problems like ours. Pray for the Presbyterian Church who has given us a model of servant faithfulness in financial reversals. Pray for the church, that we will all truly trust as much as we talk about trust.

Pray for a world where God is working, where needs are great, where Christ is leading us – not to solve all of problems, but to face the ones we see. Pray that we remember that Grace is more than sufficient and that the power of the resurrection can make all things new.

Pray that God’s will becomes our own, and we will work at the Good Shepherd’s purposes and we will live the differently abundant life, just as he taught us to pray...