

*Shepherd - King and Teacher*

Lesson: 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 10:1-10

We think of Psalm 23 as a beautiful poem, the most loved hymn in a very old hymnal. Many of us probably memorized it as children in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. We may have had one of the paintings of a shepherd and the lambs on one of the walls around the church somewhere. But in reality and in today, we are so far removed from the everyday life of sheep and shepherds that we romanticize green pastures and still waters into paintings of hillsides dotted with little lambs. We miss the meaning of the metaphors in scripture, because we do not live in their world anymore.

We romanticize the little lambs, but sheep have to be pretty tough animals. They live in the leftover lands, the rocky hillsides that cannot support other animals, except maybe goats. They graze on whatever they find, and the wild lands mean the danger of wild animals. From the earliest days of Abraham to the times of Jesus, sheep were the main source of meat on the table and wool for garments. No one thought they were special animals, unless of course they had no blemishes at all. Then they were cut out for sacrifices at the temple.

We romanticize shepherds, too, because we are not around them either. No one thought much of shepherds back then. They were the lowest working class, assigned to dangerous and dirty duty. Their main job was protector against enemies, and they were good if they didn't run away and forsake the flock. The truth is, shepherds did very important work, and did the job night and day that no one really wanted to do or thought was that important. It's not that unusual in any society to ignore or think less of the people who do the jobs that are at the center of daily life.

Psalm 23 is not a romantic hymn of thanksgiving to shepherds. It is the opposite. It is a hymn of thanksgiving to the God who is very un-godlike - who instead of demanding sacrifices and reigning down punishment takes the job of the shepherd/protector. This God is not like any of the other gods. This God takes the most humble job as guard and guide for people who, like sheep, were always going astray.

Psalm 23 is also a prayer of hope for a King who will act like a shepherd. They remembered David - the last son and the humble shepherd. He was the one God chose after all the other candidates had been rejected. David was the King who acted like a shepherd to his people. He was a King who acted like no other king. He was protector, he did not run from the enemy, and was not afraid to lay down his life. No wonder they never forgot him, and kept hoping a King like a shepherd would come back to save them.

Jesus says he is that King/Messiah. He is the "good shepherd," who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus says he is the "gate," - the shepherd who sleeps at the gate in the night to make sure that the sheep are safe in the pen. He guards them against the predators of evil. He keeps the enemies out and to make sure that the sheep don't go wandering into the dangers of the night. They have to get to him first.

Think about on your real protectors... Very few of our protectors are Kings or people in high places. Generally, the high places are far from danger, and pretty distant from the people who need protecting. Often Kings consider themselves so important that they need more protection than the sheep. Generals stay in the bunkers. The rich live behind gates.

Who in our day is in the place to lay down their lives for us? In times of danger, the shepherds of our day are the common soldiers, the police and firemen, the EMS - the social workers and teachers who stand at the door to protect, ...and don't have much protection.

Think about the personal protectors through your life. They were the ones who stayed close to you, who did not leave you in the night, who guided you in the day, who took care of our needs, and kept you from the things that looked good to you but would have hurt you in the end. They are the ones who did not ask you to serve their needs, or to obey them because they were more powerful, or because you "owed them." They are the protectors of our life and community who still do all these things, and don't ask for thanks, don't want the presents, and expect the rewards. They are your parents, your family, your closest friends who stick closer than family. They are your companions in this congregation who have been there when you were in need. They are the people who are your "go to" people, because you know they are "come to" people. They are the ones who will always stay awake at your gate.

I've been at this work for a good while, and I am convinced that churches sometimes start thinking that we are all just the helpless sheep of the shepherd. The church is like a sheep pen. We come in and go out on Sundays, and we look to the Good Shepherd to be our guard and guide. We expect God to be the shepherd king to protect us, to keep us from danger, to guard and guide us. That thinking is good as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. There is a real danger in the "just sheep thinking." It is just one image, and Jesus expects more from us than being "just sheep."

Jesus does not call us to be sheep. He calls us to be like him! He calls us to be shepherds. He calls us to do for others what we would want them to do for us. At church, we also flip the coin over and talk about being friends and shepherds. He calls us to tend the lambs, and help the weak, and serve the poor, and be shepherds to the flock.

When we see ourselves as shepherds of the Good Shepherd, it should make us more aware and more thankful of the many shepherds who guard the gates and guide the flocks. We can honor the people among us who are called to be the shepherds. The truth is we depend on a much wider group of protectors than we think. The shepherds on the hillsides are sometimes forgotten, but we depend on them more than we think.

This morning we honor our graduates. In a way, they have been sheep in this pen, and now we open the gate to send them out. We are proud of them, and we are grateful to the shepherds in our congregation who have guarded and guided them along the way. In a way, we are telling them they are on the way to becoming shepherds. They have more gifts and skills than they know, and we are excited about the ways that the wider world will show them ways that can use their gifts. We hope they will be servants and leaders, and they will always work at becoming shepherds like the good shepherd.

This morning also makes me think about the modern shepherds of our own day in the community beyond the church. They are the people who work day and night, who guard and guide, who often are criticized and ignored - and almost universally under-appreciated and under-paid. They do important work, on the job night and day, and do a lot of things no one really wants to do or thinks is that important - except of course that children were at the center of daily life.

Today, I think about the shepherds in my own life, and most of the people on that personal list are my great teachers...

My teachers were my shepherds. They were more interested in me than in some subject they taught. I'm not good at remembering names, but I can name teachers from elementary to Divinity and Graduate school who shaped my life. I'm grateful. I can't name any kings or Presidents or people in places of power who I personally owe a debt of gratitude, but I can give thanks for some teacher every time I hear Psalm 23.

Today, we can look around the room and see lots of teachers who see their calling as shepherds - and they have been good at their calling. Our graduates today are reminders that the world depends on a constant stream of sheep who go in and out the gate until they are miraculously transformed into shepherds. And we should give thanks and honor the shepherds who stand at the gate. We may not have great influences or power in high places, but we can do our part to support shepherds who are called to be teachers. We can thank any teacher we meet, we can counter every negative generalization with a positive advocacy. We can put politicians on notice who grant welfare to businesses with tax breaks to help the economy, and undermine public education in a false appeal to fiscal responsibility. As Presbyterians and shepherds, a lot of us cannot sit out on the hillside and wait for someone else to do something. We can pray for teachers. But we should also apply the rule we learned from the good shepherd: we should treat the teachers of our community the way we would want to be treated as teachers.

At Northwood We have children and sheep in our own flock, and we should not limit our commitment to sentimental support. We are a church with limited resources, so Northwood must shape its priorities to the priority that Jesus put first in his kingdom. We are the shepherds who give ourselves to the sheep in our charge, and our sheep are always the youth and children among us.

We look around and wish we had more children. Every church always wants more young families. But sometimes we want them for the wrong reason: so that we can keep the church going and it won't die when we older folk die. Churches that think that way have it backward. The young families are not here to help our church, ...to serve us. We are here to be the shepherds, to serve the sheep of the Good Shepherd that he puts in front of us and says, they come first. We all must tend the sheep, work and give and help to grow the flock. And we need to remember that we may not give our lives for the sheep, but we may need to do with less ourselves so that they can have what they need.

For many years, the youth ministry of this congregation has been funded almost totally by outside fund-raising. We all need to give to the increasing cost of scholarships for youth camps, and financing a youth program, and paying for curriculum and supplies. Youth groups need shepherds and chefs and people to just show up in support. I've heard a good many people say, "I used to..." or "I've served my time..." As a pastor, I just have to be the shepherd to the older flock and ask you to ask who else is going to do this? We are like most congregations where the majority of members are over 65, and we seem to have forgotten that churches should never be in the business of providing retirement programs for shepherds.

Vacation Bible School is coming. Every one can help some way or another. Sunday School will need more teachers next year so that we can have two classes instead of putting all the children from 1st grade to 5th grade in one class.

All I am saying is my long list of great teacher - shepherds is not limited to the ones I had in school. A lot of them are the shepherds I had in Sunday School and church activities. They gave me lessons in love and life that I could not get anywhere else. They showed me the Good Shepherd because they acted like shepherds. We need to make sure that our children and youth have shepherd examples to help them become shepherds. After all, the best way to learn is by following an example.

The Good Shepherd knew that his job was not easy. He knew that the green pastures and still waters of the hymn were far apart and hard to find in desert country. He knew that the good grass was always found in the same place where the poisonous weeds grow. He knew that the valley of the shadow was a dangerous trail on a mountain cliff, and he knew that it was his job to treat the cuts and wounds and anoint the bruises with oil.

He knew it was not an easy job, but he knew it was not someone else's job. And he knew that he was not a good shepherd because he had memorized Psalm 23 in a class at synagogue as a boy. He was a good shepherd because he stood at the door and welcomed the sheep into the fold, and he was ready to lay down his life for any one of them.