

Role of the Shepherd
John 10:1-11
April 25, 2021

Being a Shepherd was an important occupation in Bible history. The Patriarchs who lived as nomads were all shepherds and owned vast herds of animals. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all served, as did their sons, as shepherds. Joseph you will remember gave his brothers a perfect opportunity to get rid of him when he visited them near Shechem where they were 'pasturing the flock'. Moses was exiled in Midian where he worked as a shepherd for forty years before running into the burning bush. God called him to be shepherd of a different flock. He was to bring Israel out of Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land. God sent Samuel to anoint a king from the family of Jesse, but none of the seven brothers were chosen. David, the youngest, was keeping the sheep and had to be called back to Samuel.

The Psalmist sings: ***He chose his servant David and took him from the sheepfolds; from tending the nursing ewes he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel, his inheritance. With upright heart he tended them, and guided them with skillful hand. (Ps.78:70ff)*** Shepherds were the first to hear the birth announcement of the Messiah. And Jesus pointed to himself as the Good Shepherd who would not only guide and protect his flock, but would give his life for them. Shepherds were in great demand throughout biblical history, almost as much as accountants and IT specialists today.

I forget exactly when I dreamed of being a shepherd. It must have been at a transition point in my life. All I remember is actually dreaming about being a shepherd in a remote part of Scotland. I pictured a small croft in the valley surrounded by hills dotted with sheep. It was obviously one of those rare, crazy, fevered dreams that wake you in the middle of the night, but it was real and attractive at the time. I'm sure the croft had satellite T.V., Internet access and cell phone coverage; otherwise, it would be a nightmare.

The bible doesn't romanticize sheep. They can be stubborn, stupid, difficult to keep track of, and frustratingly uncooperative. If you have

visited Scotland, you will have seen how they wander all over the hills. Look up the sides of the hills and there you see them, little white dots high up near the summit. Thankfully the shepherd has trained dogs to bring them back to the shelter of the fold. They are always wandering in search of grass. If they are not gobbling on grass, they are looking at you with those blank faces as if you were an inconvenience, someone who has lost his way. I know I have run into them on the narrow road of Western Scotland and they simple will not get out of the way.

Does that remind us of ourselves sometimes in our lives? Isaiah is bolder to reminds us that we are all like sheep who have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way in the world; we have wandered away from God. This theme is captured so well in the hymn, ***Come thou Fount of Every Blessing:***

***Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood;***

Another stanza sings:

***Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.***

My guess is that the hymn writer must have had the image of the shepherd and scattered sheep somewhere in the back of his mind as he wrote.

To restore us back to a relationship with God, a shepherd was appointed to bear our sins. Jesus says as much in the metaphor of the Good Shepherd story in our Gospel today. He is the good shepherd because, unlike the hired help, he cares deeply for the sheep. Indeed, he knows each one's name and they know his voice. They gladly follow him because they know he will not only protect them with his life, but will lead them to rich pasture.

In the real world I became a shepherd true enough but not of sheep. I became a shepherd, first of the Erskine flock where I served for

twenty-four years, and now second, with you at West Flamboro. During a resurrection appearance Jesus asks Peter to: **tend his lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep**. Peter will later write to the churches: ***I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. (1Peter 5:1ff)***

Ezekiel the prophet warned that the religious leaders of his day were not acting as good shepherds. They were looking after their own welfare, not that of the people. Through the prophet God says: ***From now on, I myself am the shepherd. I'm going looking for them. As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I'm going after my sheep. I'll rescue them from all the places they've been scattered to in the storms... And I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. (Ezekiel 34:11ff)***

And this promise, made through the prophet, is realized in the life, death and resurrection of the good shepherd, Jesus Christ. What do such ancient texts say to us, allied with the Good Shepherd passage before us today? Many today may ask: is God really interested in the human family? Is God passionate about the human family? Do not all these passages speak powerfully and eloquently about God's deep and abiding love for us? I think the evidence is overwhelming!

God as shepherd is nowhere more dramatically captured than in the life of David. In the well-known Psalm 23 David sounds like a man offering a poem as he lies comfortably on his sofa drinking wine and listening to the music playing on the harp in the background. But in reality, this is a poem written, at least the inspiration for it, while he is on the run from King Saul who is bent on killing him. It is a song penned in the white heat of the fear and danger that followed him as a refugee. He hides in caves, travels across windswept mountains and empty wasteland, as he tries to outmaneuver Saul. It is the memory of those days of exile and danger that inspire this poem. It makes it all the more meaningful that he can write that God is his shepherd. He sings: ***Even though I walk through the darkest***

valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Instead of two snapping dogs at his heels, fierce and terrifying, he sings that goodness and mercy have followed him all the days of his life. What a tribute to his faith, to his good shepherd who watched over him and led him to green pastures and quiet brooks. May it be so for us!

God has placed this care of shepherding into the hands of God's people in the church. The Good Shepherd has passed this task on to the leaders, and especially the teaching and ruling elders of the church. But also to pastoral care teams and other groups within the body of Christ. Shepherding the people of God is a magnificent calling. I am very thankful for the Session elders and your pastoral care team who demonstrate love and compassion to our people. I appreciated what Kennon Callahan said about shepherding; it ***is a spirit of loving, listening, learning and blessing. Shepherds share a word of grace that encourages a person. An act of shepherding is an act of grace, compassion, community and hope.*** For this ministry at West Flamboro I am deeply grateful and bless those in the team who seek to bring grace, compassion, community and hope to each one of us. The Good Shepherd would be pleased!

Amen