

April 22, 2018

Good Shephard Sunday

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

SERMON

The fourth Sunday of Easter is always good shepherd Sunday. We always hear about the title that Jesus gives to himself. Certainly, we know Jesus by many titles. Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, Emmanuel, but this is the title that he takes upon himself. I am the good shepherd and he's talking to the people and images that they certainly understand in the first century. Sheep and shepherds abound in the first century because those animals gave so much with the wool. With their being a part of the sacrificial system. They were prominent animals in the area. They were also very prominent when the Hebrews were nomadic.

Simply because they needed to be taken from pasture to pasture anyway. And again, they provided so much for the people. So, when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." They can relate to that. They can relate to what it is and how important it was to have a shepherd. Someone who owned the sheep and cared for the sheep so that they would be well taken care of. They had to be protected. They had to be led from one pasture to another. Because if the sheep were left in one place they would eat it right down to the roots. So, on a regular basis they had to be moved. So that they could have plenty of grass to eat and plenty of water to drink.

It's not surprising that the 23rd Psalm uses the imagery of the good shepherd. Leading through valleys of death. Leading to the cool still waters, to the pastures to be fed. So, he uses this. He brings us out and people can relate. He talks about the sheep being able to recognize their voice. My own know me. I know them and my own know me. Well shepherd when he was taking care of the sheep would talk to the sheep. So that they would become familiar with the voice. Because if you had a large flock they didn't always see the shepherd. But if he was talking, if he was singing they would hear and they would continue to follow that.

It was important for the shepherd to continue to talk. To share whatever came to their minds so that the sheep would feel confident. They would feel like they were heading in the right direction. They were with the right flock. They were with the right shepherd.

(phone ringing) It reminds me, I have an announcement if you have a phone especially if you're in the front of the church would you please turn that off. I'm not even going to look back. I thought God was calling me for a second. (Laughter) It's kind of a pretty ringtone.

So, the shepherd would sing especially at night when they were bedding down, he would tell stories, he would sing. Being a shepherd was kind of a lonely thing. They would get to know the voice and they could follow it, even when they could not see the shepherd. And it's also important that the sheep pay attention. And sheep aren't really, really good at that. A lot of the time sheep will put their heads down because there's food here and would just follow that along if they're hungry. And not be paying attention to that voice.

So every once in a while, you have a sheep or two that get lost. That's why Jesus uses the parable of the 99/100 sheep. 99 stayed where they were supposed to be and one invariably wanders off because that's

what sheep do. But he tells that the good shepherd will go find that sheep and carry the sheep back to the flock. Take it that the other 99 would still be there when he returned.

This is all images that they could relate to. He takes the idea of the good shepherd. The one who defends the flock. The one who leads the flock. The one who is willing to lay down his life for the flock. That flock is us. We have heard the voice of the shepherd calling us to come and to be a part. Calling us to follow where he leads. And we translate that into our setting as following where the kingdom of God is. To pay attention. To live our lives in pursuit of the goodness that the shepherd leads us to. Not just cool water and grass but justice and mercy.

We are led to live our lives by listening to the voice of the shepherd and find a place for us in God's eternal kingdom. And we know that we are being led through our lives as we listen to the voice of the good shepherd to that place where we stand up for one another. Where we live our lives in the presence of that shepherd and we gather together. But it's important for us to hear and know and understand the voice of the shepherd.

Now in first century as far as the shepherd was concerned there wasn't a lot of voices if you were outside of town, there weren't a lot of voices that were competing with yours. Your sheep knew you pretty well. In our time, there are lots of voices that call for our attention. There are lots of voices that say you need to be concerned about you. You need to take care of you because nobody else is going to. If it's not necessarily for the benefit of others well that doesn't really matter because you have what you need. If justice doesn't serve everybody, well as long as it serves you then that's good enough isn't it. If mercy is not being shown to all the people, that's not really your concern.

Because you have to take care of you and you have to take care of your family.

That is not the voice of the good shepherd. The voice of the good shepherd tells us I love you. The voice of the good shepherd tells us I want you to love another. I want you to seek out justice not just for yourself but for all the people. I want you to seek out mercy not just for yourself but for all the people because all are part of the flock. He laid down his life not just for you, not just for some, not just for many, but for all.

There is no one who is outside of the mercy and grace of God unless they have chosen to be and that is not our judgment to make. We are called to see one another and treat one another and speak with the voice of the good shepherd. That says God loves you, God wants you to be a part, God wants you to be included. God wants you to have justice. God wants you to have mercy. God wants you to be treated with integrity as a child of God. No matter which path you have been walking.

It is for us the flock, the sheep, the citizens of God's kingdom to hear and recognize that voice and hold it up whenever we can. It is for us to follow as best as we can so that all might hear and come to know that voice. And that is why we gather here when we come together. It is to hear the voice of the shepherd. It's to hear it in the reading of the scriptures.

Sometimes when I read that gospel passage. I know that I'm not the shepherd but sometimes I feel like the hired hand. And he doesn't speak very well of the hired hand. But we all have to speak the voice of God so that we can hear it and share it and know it and understand it. So that we can lift it up for ourselves and for one another. It is for us to come together and hear that voice and to share that voice. So that

when we go out, the other voices come to our attention and the other voices call us to head our own way and to put our heads down like the sheep. Because it seems to be good for me. It does not lead us away from where the good shepherd wants us to be.

The image of the good shepherd certainly is one that was powerful in the first century. And we do have to do some redefining to understand it for our time. But it is important to remember that we listen for that voice, that it becomes the part of us familiar to us. So that we understand it apart from all the other voices that call for our attention. That we listen to it and follow it as best we can. So that we travel the path that the shepherd is leading us. Because the shepherd is leading us home. The shepherd is leading us to the kingdom of God. The shepherd is leading us to eternal life and as we share the story, others will join. Others will follow. Others will find their way home.

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