

## **Follow the Leader**

John 10:1-16

Crossroads CC

Psalm 23

Easter 4—May 11, 2014

When I think about Christ as the Good Shepherd, an early memory comes to my mind, an image of an old picture hanging in my grandparents' bedroom in Ottumwa, Iowa. My folks weren't church goers, and at that age I hadn't started attending Sunday school, so I didn't know a whole lot about Jesus. But that picture on the wall gave me an important lesson. It was the old traditional picture of Jesus walking down a path, carrying a lamb tenderly in his arms. Alongside him were sheep, looking up at him adoringly. I instinctively knew from the picture that here was somebody kind, somebody responsible, somebody I could trust. Later, when I became a Christian and would hear the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm or study about Jesus being the Good Shepherd, that old picture would come to mind as a frame of reference.

But the oddest thing happened when I was in high school. For a period of less than two years, we lived on a small acreage. I developed a little more understanding of what it meant to care for animals as I raised a few calves from just-weaned to yearling. That was fun, though it was a bit of hard work to drag them back when they would escape and go places they weren't supposed to. Then, one spring, my dad brought a small flock of sheep. We had some good pasture, and he assumed they would be low-maintenance. Wrong. If they saw you coming, they'd run the other way. They would always seem to do the most ignorant thing possible. They worked really hard to get out of that green pasture that we had provided to get into my mother's vegetable garden. I don't think that more than a few weeks passed before dad sold them off to somebody who hopefully knew what they were doing more than we did. After that, when we went to visit my grandparents, I would see those

sheep looking up at Jesus, and I'd think, "How did he do that?" Were those sheep smarter than ours? Or did it have to do with the shepherds?

But let's stop and think about this image for a moment, the image of God as the good shepherd in Psalm 23, and the image of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd in John 10. We know that it says a lot about the caring nature of God, and about Jesus Christ. But what does it say about us? Obviously, if God, or Jesus, is the Good Shepherd, we must be the sheep. Like the psalmist says, "For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand." (95:7) and "Know that the Lord is God! It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture." Yet there's some harsh realism that comes to play, for the psalmist also admits, "I have gone astray, like a lost sheep." And the prophets talked about the people of Israel becoming lost and scattered, like sheep w/o a shepherd. So the question comes up. Are we more like the sheep in my grandmother's painting, looking adoring, trusting, up at our master, or carried in our master's arms, or like those sheep of my acreage, stubborn, fearful, always running the wrong way, getting into trouble?

Craig Barnes, a Presbyterian pastor, had some wonderful insights into this matter that he wrote about in the Christian Century. "Sheep aren't particularly smart. They scare easily; and have a knack for getting lost. Most of us don't look lost," he reminds us. "We haven't fallen through society's cracks into homelessness and poverty. But David would say, "Oh, no. It is you who have lost your way in a relationship that's offered more hurt than love, in a job that leaves you depleted and spent, or in the guilt of not being good enough, pretty enough or smart enough for someone whose judgments cut deep." (unquote)

He's right, isn't he? We do get lost. We may lose our physical health. Our attitudes may turn bitter, or uncaring.

We turn in upon ourselves and shut the world out. Or we get so busy being a good parent, a good spouse, a good employee, or a good church member that we wear ourselves to a frazzle. Or a harmless escape becomes an addiction, a way of avoiding a reality that we don't want to face. And just like the sheep who nibbles its way away from the flock, we don't realize what's happened until we lift our heads, look around, and realize that we're all alone.

That's judgment, isn't it? We end up lost and alone, and when we realize the fact, we panic and end up more lost, more alone. But then we hear a voice—the voice of someone looking for us. It could be a phrase in the worship service, perhaps the reading of scripture or a flash of insight during the communion service; it could be the concerned look on the face of one who loves us; it could be a physical warning sign that shows we've been neglecting our health; it could be a silent stirring within our soul—but still it's the voice of the Good Shepherd, calling us back, calling us home. It's the voice of the One who will go to any lengths to find us, to rescue us, to save us from our own stupidity and sin. It's the voice of the one who went to the cross for us, the good shepherd who laid down his life for us, the one who defeated the final enemy, death itself, so that we might be rescued by his resurrection power.

When Jesus Christ talked about being the good shepherd, and the gate that guarded the sheepfold, he wasn't mixing metaphors. When evening would come in Bible times, the shepherds would lead their sheep into an enclosed area with a single opening. The shepherd would lie down to sleep across that opening, a gate to keep the sheep in, and to keep predators out. He would lay his life on the line to protect his flock. Tim Yancey and Phillip Stafford told a story about a Christian dentist named James Reddick, who took his 12-year-old daughter and 11-year old son hiking on Mount Ranier on Memorial Day weekend. A sudden storm came up,

a terrible blizzard, that made it impossible to see where they were going, and threatened to blow them off the path. They dug in, making an oblong trench, covering it with a tarp. Reddick tucked the children into their sleeping bags at the far end, the sheltered end, and himself laid down across the more exposed side. Two days passed, and rescuers finally came to dig them out. The children were alive, but their father was frozen to death because he had used his own back as the outer wall, the barrier between his children and the cold winds. He lived what Jesus did, laying down his life for his flock.

When the two bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon last year, we saw evil at work; but right afterwards, as First Responders charged into action, police, fire fighters, EMTs, we saw good people risking their own lives to help others, to carry the wounded to safety. They were good shepherds.

So what does this all mean to us? How should we respond? God calls us to love and trust, God calls us to obedience, and looking for us when we're lost. But throughout the Bible, the message seems to be, God, Jesus, is the Good Shepherd; but you are more than sheep. You are shepherds, too. On Mother's Day, it's good to remember the women who shepherded us; both those who gave us birth and those who nurtured us and protected us. As parents, when you dedicate your infants, you are promising to shepherd your child so he or she can follow the Good Shepherd. As congregation members, we make similar promises, to love, nourish, and guide the children of this church and community—to be shepherds. We are called to live out the ways of love and justice, to reach out and help those who are lost and despairing.

Only God—through Jesus Christ—is THE Good Shepherd. But God wants you to be A good shepherd. You've heard the voice calling. How do you respond? Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon