

The Shepherd's Voice

Crossroads Christian Church

John 10:11-18

April 26, 2015

Psalm 23

Easter 4B, Good Shepherd

At the elder's meeting last Wednesday, we began a DVD study on what it is to be a Disciples elder. One of the questions that we discussed was to name elders who were role models in our own lives. I thought of many through the years, but as I thought through that question by myself, I asked myself, who were some elders who helped shepherd me as the pastor? Many elders have made me feel welcome in the church and have given me good advice. One gently told me that I had inadvertently hurt the feelings of a young person, which allowed me to go and make things right. Another elder, in a time of congregational conflict, offered to speak to a good friend of his who was the person that was generating the conflict. Others came and visited me when I was the one in the hospital—even though they lived over a hundred miles from where I was in the hospital. These elders, and many like them, took seriously their role as shepherds, and I have always counted the elders as partners in ministry.

I invite you to think for a moment of who were some of your shepherds in life—parents, preachers, elders, teachers, older siblings, scout leaders, friends? Just let a few names pop up to the surface. (pause) Now say with me, "Thank you God,/ for these people/ who have been good shepherds/ to me."

We have known many good shepherds, but Jesus Christ is *the* Good Shepherd. On some church calendars, the fourth Sunday of Easter is called Good Shepherd Sunday, and each year, the lectionary looks at stories and teachings that help us understand Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

I read once that some of the earliest attempts to picture Jesus Christ, from caves and ancient churches, aren't pictures of the infant Jesus in the cradle or the suffering Christ on the cross, but of Jesus as a good shepherd. In what might be the earliest representation of all, in a catacomb in Rome, where the persecuted church worshiped underground, Jesus is shown as a very young man, dressed in a short tunic, with a lamb over his shoulders.¹ So this image of Jesus goes back a long ways.

Today, there are many false shepherds who court our allegiance; political and racial ideologies, religious or self-help cults, self-promoting prosperity gospel gurus, marketers who

prey on our weak spots to make us buy their good news of good news. But it's only Jesus Christ who is our true good shepherd.

Let's put Jesus' claim to be the good shepherd in biblical perspective. In those times and that place, shepherding was a common and highly visible occupation. The early patriarchs and matriarchs were shepherds, migrating at the pace of their flocks chewing grass. Eventually, after they had landed in slavery in Egypt, Moses had run away from Egypt and had become a shepherd, where he met God at the burning bush. He led the people to freedom. They established a new land and built their own towns. Eventually, they developed priests and kings and other leaders. Their greatest king, David, was literally a shepherd as a youth. When the kings and leaders would follow their own ways instead of God's way, prophets would take them to task. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all condemned those who had become false shepherds, the self-serving leaders. Jeremiah, for example, said

For the shepherds are stupid,
and do not inquire of the Lord;
therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.

But Jeremiah also promised God's care for the scattered people, that God would become their good shepherd "I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding."

And David gave us the Shepherd psalm that we said earlier, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. And a descendent of David, Jesus Christ, became the Good Shepherd. We can trust in the One who takes care of us, who knows us each individually, who calls us by name.

John Shearman posted this story that shows the impact that the 23rd Psalm can have on our lives: "An elderly Scottish farmer and elder of a rural congregation suffered a stroke which robbed him of his voice, his freedom to walk and his ability to feed himself. This forced him to spend the last years of his life confined to a bed and a wheelchair in a nursing home. Although he was fully alert to all that went on around him, he could only respond by nodding and shaking his head. One day his pastor received word that the elder was dying and went to the nursing home to see him. The elder's eyes were closed and he seemed unaware of his visitor. As the pastor held the man's feeble hand,

he wondered how to give him some special gift that might bring comfort to his last hours. Quietly he repeated the 23rd Psalm. Instantly, the man's eyes opened wide. Tears flowed down his cheeks as his eyes expressed the gratitude his voice could not utter. The pastor offered the Hebrew benediction, "The Lord bless you and keep you" and left. Just a few days later, the Shepherd Psalm was sung at the elder's funeral service."ⁱⁱ

Wes Morgan, a friend of mine, paraphrased Psalm 23 to describe his relationship with Jesus Christ.

"Jesus is my friend, what more could I want?

He sits with me in the quiet times of the day;

he listens to my concerns; he comforts and uplifts my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through times of darkest trouble

I am not afraid, -- for you are with me,

your love and care they sustain me.

You meet my needs even in the presence of my enemies.

You bless me with all I need, -- my life is full

Certainly, your goodness and mercy will be with me every day of my life, and I will live in the family of God forever."

Let's think a little more about what it means to be a shepherd. It's not a profession that we're very familiar with, although I recall as a child in western Colorado seeing flocks of sheep being moved from one grazing land to another. Those shepherds led the sheep by pushing them from behind, and by using sheep dogs to keep them from going off in the wrong direction. Sandy and I learned something about sheep dogs when we fell in love with an adorable, furry little puppy in a pet store window in Indianapolis, while we were in seminary. We named her Pokey, because she liked to poke at things with her paws when she played with them. She was half border collie. One day we invited our neighbors over for a barbecue. They brought their little toddler, a one-year-old. We were all sitting on our patio waiting for the food to cook, when we noticed something extraordinary. Every time the little boy would wander too near the edge of the patio, the border collie puppy would cut in front of him, and force him back to the middle. She didn't want him to fall and hurt himself! Her sheepdog instinct kicked in again and

again as she herded the little wanderer. So Pokey the puppy was acting like a shepherd, protecting her flock.

In Bible days, I've heard that shepherds didn't push their sheep from behind, they led their sheep. They knew the sheep and called them by name, and the sheep would follow. "Come, Tanglehorn. Black Spot, over this way. Flop Ear, don't get lost!" The shepherds were willing to lay down their lives to protect the sheep, and the sheep knew it. They trusted their shepherds. So it was that Jesus compared himself to the good shepherds, the ones who cared for their flocks. He was God's shepherd, leading his followers to the green pastures, the still waters.

The Good Shepherd, as Jesus described him in John 10, protected the sheep at night by gathering them in a sheepfold, a pen, and then he would lie down and be the gate to the pen, preventing wild animals from coming to prey on the sheep. He would lay down his life for his flock.

God, through Jesus Christ, is our Good Shepherd, too. God calls us by name. God is constantly with us, leading us to green pastures and still waters, guiding us through the dark shadows of the valley of death, so that we might dwell in God's house forever. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ Lucy Lind Hogan, Working Preacher.Org, for April 29, 2012.

ⁱⁱ John Shearman, *John Shearman's Lectionary Resources*, seemslikegod.com, 4th Sunday of Easter B.