

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-15

Sermon for April 30, 2023

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep

Throughout the OT, the writers use many different images to represent or characterize God. Thus we have images of God as a rock, as a fire, as a mighty wind, as a gentle breeze, as a stern lawgiver, as a loving mother, and as a friend walking alongside in a garden, and many others as well.

Yet perhaps the most frequent image as well as the richest in significance that the writers used to represent God is the image of the shepherd.

And that might seem to be a surprising choice in many ways, because the shepherd in Israel stood on the very lowest rung of the social scale. Shepherds had a hard, dirty, lonely, low paying job. As a rule, they weren't even allowed to worship in the temple or socialize with their observant brethren because since they were in constant contact with dead animals they were almost always ritualistically unclean. If a family had a flock of sheep, it was the youngest and therefore least important of the sons who had the job of tending to the flock. (Remember the story of David – who became the 'Shepherd-King' of Israel: he was the youngest son, who had to stay at home watching the sheep while his older brothers went off to war.)

And yet that is the image the Holy Spirit in inspiring the writers of the OT returns to again and again to represent God and his relationship to his creation, perhaps nowhere more beautifully than in the 23rd Psalm, which we read today. And it is that same OT image which our Lord appropriates to himself in our Gospel reading for today. So let's read that passage together.

John 10: 1-15

Let's look first at the Psalm. It is undoubtedly the most beloved of all the psalms: it's the one everyone recognizes, the one everyone can recite, at least roughly, by heart. If you've been attending church for a while, you've probably heard more than a few sermons preached on it, and Jim likes to recite it while serving the bread portion of our Communion. Its basic thought is not difficult to understand: God will take care of his people if they put their trust in Him, just like a shepherd takes care of his flock as long as they follow his lead and don't go off following their own nose.

That's it. In transcendently beautiful language, that's what the song is singing. Sheep don't have to worry about tomorrow, that's the shepherd's job; sheep don't have to deal with enemies, the shepherd has his rod and staff; sheep don't have to wrack their brains about which path to follow, all they have to do is get in line and follow the shepherd. And should they follow in faith, their spiritual life and all of its necessary provisions and rewards are secured, in this life and in the eternal life to come. For the Psalmist, for the reader, as for the sheep, faith is the key. That's the message.

In our passage from John, that issue is settled, and Jesus instead develops the shepherd/sheep relationship further. And he does so by introducing a couple of elements that aren't present in the 23rd Psalm.

The first is the element of the sheepfold. And to see what that adds, it's helpful to know a little about the sheepfold as it existed in Israel then, and still does in many parts of the world today. These sheepfolds were scattered around the hills and countryside where shepherds grazed their sheep. They were roughly circular arrangements of stones piled up high enough to prevent the sheep from wandering and to block wild predators from attacking them, thus forming a kind of pen in which the sheep could safely spend the night.

Each of these pens had one small opening where there were no stones, and it was through that opening that the shepherd led his sheep in the evening, and led them back out in the morning. And during the night, the shepherd himself would lie down in that opening to sleep, and thus his body would complete the circle.

That's the picture Jesus has in mind when he refers to himself in verse 7-9:

Most assuredly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep...If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.

But now let's take this a step further. In the wilderness, often more than one shepherd with his flock would use the same sheepfold at night. When the morning came, therefore, there was the problem of each shepherd separating his own flock to go out

for the day to graze for food. How would the shepherd determine which were his sheep and which belonged to the other shepherd or shepherds?

Here's how it was done. Every shepherd had a distinctive call – a long, warbling cry, something like what we might call a yodel, and the sheep had all learned to identify that call with their own shepherd. It was referred to as the name of his sheep. So in the morning, the shepherd would stand in the opening and utter his own peculiar cry, and his own sheep would recognize that cry and rouse themselves and follow him out to begin their day's wandering. And that's what Jesus is talking about when he says:

...and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. (3-7)

That's the image of his parable. But what is it telling us?

Right before the passage we're examining now, in chapter nine, John has described a miracle of Jesus where he has miraculously restored sight to a blind man, and John tells us that some of the Pharisees who were witnesses to that miracle still refused to believe and follow Jesus. And it is to those very Pharisees that Jesus offers this image of the sheep and their shepherd.

What he's addressing, in other words, is the haunting and mysterious problem of why some people respond to Jesus and others don't: in the imagery of the parable, why some people hear and recognize and follow his voice, and others don't. What is it that some hear in the voice of Jesus that some recognize and others don't?

Our selection for today doesn't fully answer that question, but I think that at least the beginnings of an answer are found in another element that Jesus introduces in the imagery of his parable. That is the element of his own ownership of the sheep. He contrasts the shepherd who owns his own sheep, with the shepherd who has simply been hired to tend someone else's flock. Let me read it again:

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. But a hireling...one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees...he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know **my** sheep, and am known by **my own**.*

Let me offer a homely example for comparison. Suppose you work at Walmart, and during your shift the alarm goes off to signal that someone has stolen something from the store. You might be upset and angry and indignant that someone would steal from

the store; but contrast that to how you would feel if, instead of at Walmart, you were working in your own little shop in Albion.

You see the difference. You see what a difference ownership makes?

Returning to our Gospel selection, the difference among the sheep is that the shepherd owns them, they belong to him. He has chosen them.

And in the same manner, Jesus has chosen us. He says that explicitly to his twelve disciples, as John quotes him in his 15th chapter-*You did not choose me, but I chose you.* (v. 16)-but the parable teaches us that all the sheep of his flock have been chosen by him, they all belong to him. The difference between the Good Shepherd's sheep and all the others is that they belong to his flock, he has taken ownership of them.

For many, almost all, in fact, who have talked about this question have used this parable and many others to help them explain why some are lost and some are saved, why some achieve salvation while others are doomed to eternal despair. But I don't believe that's what Jesus is illustrating at all.

In this church, we rest our faith in the universal salvation of all through Jesus Christ. And I think that's what is being taught here. What Jesus is pointing out is what the difference would be between a world without his ownership, and one where he has purchased the world. The difference is not between those who follow Him and those who don't; the difference is between the world without Christ, and the world now that Christ as appeared among us, and paid the price for us, for all of us, for the whole world.

On the cross, Jesus paid the price for the whole world. The difference illustrated by the parable is not between those who belong to Jesus and those who don't; the difference is between those who realize and accept that Jesus has paid the price for their salvation, and those who have not yet come to that realization.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul puts it this way: *"You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies."*(6: 20)

The voice is an amazing thing, when you stop to think about it. If I were to ask all of you right now to pause for a moment and remember your mother's voice, you could easily do so. And in fact, each of you could pick out your mother's voice from a thousand others who might speak to you, or ten thousand. And every one of you would trust that voice, more than you would any of the ten thousand. Why? Because you recognize in it the voice of parental love.

Everyone here in this church .this morning has heard and trusted Jesus: that's why you're here. You haven't heard his voice with your physical ears, but something in your spirit has heard and trusted and responded to Jesus. What you have heard in your spirit, whether you know it or not, is the loving voice of someone to whom you belong.

What Jesus came to teach us is something hidden to the ages before, something no other religion or philosophy or product of human wisdom has ever imagined: that God, the source of all creation and all life, loves each one of us with an unending and inextinguishable parental love. And what Jesus did on the cross was to prove to us the truth of that unfathomable, wondrous instruction.

The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly father, is that among all the noise and clamor and confusion that surrounds our lives, despite the chatter and hypocrisy and self-deception that we ourselves are prone to contribute, that you keep our spirit always attentive to the awakening cry, the daily guidance, and the loving lullabies of our Good Shepherd, our Savior and our Lord, Jesus Christ, whose possession we are and in whose name we pray. Amen.