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“Shepherds”

Psalm 23 John 10:22-42 Acts 9:36-43 Revelation 7:9-17

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 10:22-44. In spite of the fact that for most of us the image of sheep and shepherd is foreign to our experience, the words of the Gospel this morning point us to a truth that hearts long to hear. We are known by name. We are loved. We are in the care of THE Good Shepherd. Would you please stand for the reading of the gospel from John 10:22-44.

Let's pray. Thank you Lord that you do watch over us, that you care for us, that you provide for us that you lead us. Help us to be willing followers where you lead. Help us to trust you. Speak to us now through this your word. As we meditate on your word may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our redeemer. And the people said, “Amen.”

When I was at a Conference in Orlando, one of the speakers told a story of a pastor who was in the Holy Land and saw a shepherd on a hillside tending sheep. The pastor wandered over to the shepherd and struck up a conversation. Luckily, the shepherd spoke a little English. The pastor asked the shepherd, “How many sheep do you have in your flock?” The shepherd looked over the flock and said, “All of them.” The pastor didn't think the shepherd understood his question, so he asked again, “How many sheep do you have in your flock?” The shepherd indicated he didn't know what the pastor was asking. Finally the pastor realized that the shepherd didn't know how to count. The shepherd didn't count his sheep. He knew his sheep by name. (It's a good thing because it's hard to be a good shepherd when you're counting sheep because it puts you to sleep and you can't guard your sheep ☺)

Each year we file our income taxes. Our lives are filled with numbers-pages upon pages of numbers: earned numbers, spent numbers, invested numbers, and saved numbers. When it is finally prepared, we send it off to the Internal Revenue Service with our Social Security number on it. (I'm taking ours to the accountant tomorrow morning. We got an extension Paul). The IRS takes all those numbers and puts them into a computer, along with the numbers of thousands and thousands of other people. To them, we are just another number.

To get a Driver's License number, we have to pass 3 tests- a written test and a nerve-racking driving test and a vision test. It is one of the odder quirks of the DMV (Division of Motor Vehicles) that the eye exam is often given last — suggesting that knowing the rules and operating a vehicle are more important than being sure you can see where you are going!

As Jesus strolled around the temple during the festival of Dedication, his image was at odds with the picture of a Messiah that the Jewish people had come to expect. They couldn't see where he was going. To those who questioned his identity and challenged him to tell them "plainly" if he were the Messiah, Jesus just didn't look right or sound right. His words and images were not what they expected. How could suffering bring

salvation? How could weakness bring strength? How could a shepherd stand up against a soldier? (well there was David and Goliath). How could the presence of Almighty God reside in such a humble spirit as this Jesus? They were failing their vision test.

Earlier in their conversation Jesus described himself as “The Good Shepherd.” If I had to nominate one animal to represent the word mediocre, a sheep would easily be in the top five. Sheep are not independent. They cannot defend themselves. They are not strong, creative, or brave. They cannot even work up a good stampede. Normally, they just sort of meander. They mosey. Sheep will not be driven like cattle. You get behind cattle and drive them, but you get in front of sheep and lead them. However, here’s something I learned this week. I discovered that cows will form cliques and will “bully” other cows. But Sheep will shun “bully sheep.”

Besides being wool factories sheep do have one additional particularly admirable quality. They will follow their shepherd. If you move three flocks into a field, place three shepherds at three strategic points and have each of them issue a call. The sheep will sort themselves. You will not need brands to recognize which sheep belongs to which shepherd. Every animal will only follow its own shepherd.

Last Sunday we read where Jesus met the Simon the fisherman that he had called to be a fisher for people to change his job description to being a shepherd of sheep. Jesus asked Simon three times whether he loved Him, and Simon answered three times that he did. And Jesus said to him. “Feed my sheep.” In the dictionary, one of the meanings of “pastor” is “shepherd,” coming from a Latin word which means “feeder.” It is the same in Spanish. A popular name for Spanish churches is El Buen Pastor church—the Good Shepherd Church. (Tacos Al Pastor however have always given me pause.)

Once when I was driving on the West Beltway and I came up behind a panel van. On the back window of the van the driver had painted these words. “Jehovah es me pastor. Nada me faltara’.” The Lord is my shepherd. Nothing am I lacking. To that I would add, “Jesus es mi Buen Pastor—Jesus is my Good Shepherd.”

The Good Shepherd cares for all of His sheep and not just some of them--and not for some of them more than others of them. Remember that Jesus was talking to a people who had come to think of themselves as “God’s chosen people.” So he said to them these shocking words: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (John 10:6)

In that context, I think he was probably referring to the Gentiles who had not yet heard the good news of the Gospel. Some of disciples would never even think of entering the home of a Gentile (like Peter in Acts 10) but they would begin to realize that the good news which Jesus came to bring was for “every kindred, every tribe.”

Down through the centuries, one of the hardest things that God has had to deal with in us is the sin of “exclusivity.” The Gospel of Jesus Christ is precisely the opposite of

exclusivity. Jesus taught us to pray “OUR Father,” not “MY Father.” And that “our” includes not just one race or nation, one religion or denomination, but all, everywhere. . God is not seeking to inhibit our lives, but to inhabit them, so that we might truly have life, life with a capital “L,”--life abundant, and life eternal.

God enters into a relationship with persons, and then almost immediately those persons try to put a fence around themselves and say, “Private property, off limits to outsiders.” Once we have come to believe that God is the personal property of our people or our country, then it becomes very difficult for God to get it into our heads that God cares for those folks “over there” just as much as God cares for us folks “over here.”

The Good Shepherd promises to watch over His sheep. That does not mean that they will never encounter any problems. It does mean that they need never face any problems alone. The 23rd Psalm does not promise us that we will never have to go through “the valley of the shadow of death”...but it does promise us that none need make that journey alone. **EVEN THOUGH I GO THROUGH the valley I will not fear because ...Thou art with me.**

Following the Good Shepherd is not a means of evading or avoiding the difficult times of life. Difficult times come to all people. Through faith we can face those challenges head on knowing we do not face them alone. The power behind us is greater than the problems before us.

The Good Shepherd goes after His sheep when they get lost. This is the new and shocking dimension of God’s love which Jesus came to bring and died to prove. When Jesus was criticized for hanging out with the “wrong kinds” of people, he replied to His critics: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” (Luke 15:4) In Jesus we see a God who does not simply write off His losses, but goes out to seek and to save the least, the last, and the lost.

A mother of eight children was once asked if she had any favorites. “Favorites?” she replied. “Yes, I have favorites. I love the one who is sick until he is well again. I love the one who is in trouble until he is safe again. And I love the one who is farthest away until he comes home.”

Not all of us can be a mother, but all of us are here because we had a mother that brought us into this world. We may have had a good relationship with our mother or we may not. We may be estranged from our mother, or maybe even never knew her. But we all have someone who loves us like a mother should.

Jesus said he was like a mother hen who longed to gather her chicks under her wings to protect them. Jesus said, “God is a like a Divine Parent whose love never stops, a Parent whose love will never give up. God is like THE GOOD Mother. You may stop loving God, but God will never stop loving you. You may run away from God, but you

will soon find that you cannot run forever. You can't get away from God. That is not a threat. That is a promise!

Isaiah wrote, "Like a mother who comforts her child so the Lord comforts us." He also wrote, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned aside to our own wicked ways." We want what we like - even when what we like is not good for us. We need protection from predators and thieves. We need protection from ourselves. Without a shepherd we are like sheep that are in danger of grazing our way right off a cliff. When we get weighed down with the burrs and mud and debris and yes, the manure of this world and we need the Good Shepherd to come clean us up. When we get knocked over and find ourselves upside down unable to right ourselves and we need the Good Shepherd to come and get us back on our feet. We need somebody to point us in the right directions, somebody to help us with our decisions. Jesus is applying for the job. The question is, "Are we listening?"

I posted a cartoon on my Thursday Faith Lift of a sheep on a chaise lounge with headphones, looking at a cell phone in front of a TV. His shepherd was calling for him but he couldn't hear. The caption had the sheep wondering, "I wonder why I don't hear from the shepherd anymore."

John Pavelko writes, "You and I have been placed in a very large field that is called the world. Many voices are calling us to come and join them. The voice of materialism wants us to deny our faith in the supernatural and believe only in the physical world. The voice of consumerism calls us to fulfill our envy by overspending on vacations, cars, clothes and homes. The voice of entertainment wants to fill our lives with media-driven bells and whistles that grab our attention, isolate us from our family and friends and then leave us with nothing but an oversized bill. 1

Finally, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. (John 10:11) Not only did Jesus come to seek and to save the lost that had strayed, he came to save all who have strayed. He came for the 1 AND the 99. In the 11th verse of this chapter Jesus said, I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus also said, "Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

This week Kendrick Castillo was one of nine students who were shot inside the K-12 STEM School in Douglas County, Colorado. Unarmed, Kendrick ran toward the shooter and knocked him down but was killed doing so. Kendrick laid down his life for his friends. Two weeks ago a University of North Carolina-Charlotte student Riley Howell gave his life by rushing toward the shooter to protect students at UNCC during a mass shooting that killed two people and wounded several others. Riley laid down his life for his friends. 3 weeks ago Lori Gilbert-Kaye, 60, died during the Passover celebration at the Chabad of Poway Synagogue near San Diego when a gunman burst in and opened fire with "an AR-type weapon," injuring three others, according to police and witnesses. She laid down her life trying to protect her rabbi. Over 2,000 years ago a rabbi laid down his life for the world of his friends, including us in this room.

We have a shepherd, THE Good Shepherd. Jesus wants to lead us and point us to the abundant life he came to provide. Jesus has claimed us. We are more than a number. He knows us by name. He has promised to lead us beside quiet streams. He has promised to prepare a place for us to dwell with him forever in heaven. He has promised to provide for our needs in his timing. He wants to exercise leadership in our lives. He wants us to follow him. Jesus is our Good Shepherd wanting to lead us, if we will submit to his leadership and all that that entails.

Like a shepherd who doesn't know how to count sheep but knows each one by name, like a mother of 8 children for whom all her children are favorites, and like Lori Gilbert-Kaye, and Riley Howell and Kendrick Castillo who laid down their lives for their friends, Jesus is THE Good Shepherd who knows us by name, claims us all as favorites and laid down his life for us.... So may we listen for his voice and follow him and follow his example in hopes that when it comes to our friends, we too, though we may not be THE Good Shepherd we might become some more good ... shepherds.