

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“The Lord is Our Shepherd: Leading from Behind”  
Rev. Joanne Blair  
August 12, 2018

During this sermon series on the 23rd Psalm, we’re learning a fair amount about sheep. It’s kind of like taking “Shepherding 101.” And there’s a good reason that we should. Without understanding some of the nature of sheep and shepherding, we cannot fully grasp the Biblical writer’s intent. Just as Jesus used common day examples in his stories and parables, so the psalmist made his words applicable to the circumstances of his day. And the more we understand those circumstances, the richer and more meaningful the words become.

Sheep actually require quite a lot of careful handling and direction. Left to their own devices, sheep will graze over and over in certain areas, gnawing and pawing to the point that even the roots of the grass are destroyed. The result is that the land gets rutted, the soil depleted and eroded, and these areas become infested with various parasites ... which of course, infect the sheep.

Sheep also have a strong instinct to follow the sheep in front of them ... even when it’s not in their best interest. They don’t think about it ... rather, it’s just “hard wired” into them. Sheep have been known to jump off a cliff solely because the one in front of them did. Neglectful shepherds have lost large groups of sheep this way.

Then there’s the rogue sheep that actually veers away from the group to seek greener pastures. The problem here is that sheep have a horrible sense of direction and become totally lost ... even when the flock is not far away.

A good shepherd, of course, knows all of this. And a good shepherd of the Psalmist’s time kept his sheep on the move ... and moving in the right direction. He was a man of integrity who never left his sheep and would protect them whatever the cost. He knew which paths were reliable and led to better grasses. Through his skill and his relationship with the sheep, he was able to lead them through narrow paths safely. And he knew when to walk in front of them, behind them, or alongside of them.

A good shepherd cared for, and about his sheep. And the health, behavior and well-being of these sheep was a direct correlation to the shepherd’s own reputation. I really hope that by now you are seeing the connection between shepherds, sheep ... and us!

- How many times do we do the same thing over and over, expecting a different result? (Don’t we attribute that to Albert Einstein’s definition of insanity?)
- How often do we cling to habits and behaviors that we know are damaging to ourselves or others?
- How often do we continue certain practices, not because they are best, but because that’s the way we’ve always done it?
- How many times do we follow other people or the media, without really discerning who or what it is we’re following?
- How often are we just plain stuck ... stuck in a rut, with no good result?
- Or, how many times do our pride and self-assertion lead us to do whatever we feel like, without any further thought ... and lead us down wrong paths ... leaving us totally lost?

We need a shepherd. We need a good shepherd. And Jesus tells us that he is The Good Shepherd. In the book of John, Jesus says “I am the good shepherd.” He also says, “I am the gate for the sheep.” And Jesus will lead us in paths of righteousness. In our scripture from Matthew this morning, Jesus prepares us that the road to the narrow gate is hard. But he will keep us moving in the right direction. The problem is that we have more autonomy than sheep, and we often choose not to follow.

I would venture to guess that if you looked at a drawing of each of our lives, most of us would not have a straight line from birth to the narrow gate. My own probably looks like a lot of scribbles ... with lots of starts and stops. Most of us know life as a winding road, and that is our humanness. Sometimes we lose the shepherd ... but the shepherd never

loses us. Sometimes we seek to hear the shepherd's voice, but don't know how to listen. And sometimes the shepherd leads from behind.

We are asked to follow and be obedient to God not because we are forced to, but because we choose to. And if we truly have any grasp on the love and goodness of God, we will want to. But we need to take it seriously.

Too often, I fear, we lean on in the words that, "in Jesus Christ we are forgiven", and then we go on our merry way. Yet God is a loving and forgiving God. And even when we wander off those paths of righteousness and go wandering in the wilderness, God does not give up on us. God's desire is that we each become more and more conformed to the image of Christ. Last week, John talked about our souls being restored. Well, God restores us so that we might be guided and led into right ways once again. The sheep that doesn't stay close to the shepherd will be lost or stuck in a rut once again.

It is up to us to be open to where God leads us. Sometimes the shepherd is in front of us showing the way. Sometimes the shepherd is beside us building relationship and encouraging us. Sometimes the shepherd is behind us, challenging us to discern. Yet the shepherd is still always leading ... if we but follow.

When our daughter was younger, I was teaching her how to ride her bike to my parents' house. First, I led the way. After a few times, we rode side by side, so I could coach and encourage her. Finally, I rode behind her ... and led from behind. But I was still there.

The shepherd is always there to guide us. To guide us to the narrow gate that leads to life. To be with us when the road is hard. To guide us to paths of righteousness for his name's sake. "For his name's sake." Just as the health and welfare of the sheep affects the shepherd's name (or reputation), so we affect God's reputation. God has connected God's name and God's glory with God's people. We are ambassadors of Christ.

But righteousness always begins and ends with God – not us. It is not for our name that we walk in paths of righteousness, but for the honor and glory of God. All paths of righteousness are paths of love. And we can only get there if we follow the Good Shepherd, who often leads from behind.

The 23rd Psalm is a beautiful description of a life in close relationship with God.

Once a famous actor was at a social gathering and got many requests to recite favorite excerpts from literary pieces. An old preacher there asked the actor to recite the 23rd Psalm. The actor agreed on the condition that the preacher would also recite it. The actor's recitation was stunning and received much applause. The preacher's voice was rough and broken and wasn't very polished. But when he finished, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. Someone asked the actor what made the difference, and he replied, "I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd." [Bible Illustrator for Windows (Hiawatha, IO: Parsons Technologies, 1994)]

And so our challenge this week is to ask ourselves:

1. How well do I know the shepherd?
2. Am I following The Good Shepherd?
3. Am I living my life such that it honors God's name?