

"The Right Shepherd"

Psalm 23 & John 10:1-10

April 17, 2005

This is a test. It is only a test. As a congregation - as with one voice - complete the following without looking at your papers.....

The Lord is [my shepherd]

I shall not be [in want]

He makes me [lie down in green pastures]

He leads me [beside still waters]

You say that with great confidence. You know the right words. Is it true? Is the Lord really your shepherd? And if so do you really want a shepherd? Do you know what God seeks to do for you and why as your shepherd?

The pastor of a rich suburban parish was speaking to the Sunday school kids. He told them that as the pastor he was like a shepherd and the members of his congregation were the sheep. He then put this question to them: "What does the shepherd do for the sheep?" A little fellow in the front row raised his hands and answered, "He fleeces them."

Jesus referred to himself as the 'good shepherd' and in today's gospel takes it a step farther by saying that He is the "gate" of the sheepfold. It is a way in which He is describing what He does as a 'good shepherd'. It has always impressed me to think of the ancient shepherds of Israel making a temporary enclosure to gather their sheep in for the night. Instead of figuring out a way to make a door, the shepherd would simply lie down at the opening and become the gate. No sheep could go out into the dangers of the night without the shepherd knowing it. No predator could walk into the pen without going over the body of the shepherd. In a real way, Jesus is describing the primary mission of the shepherd by saying that He is the gate. The gate provided protection for the sheep - his mission, first and foremost was to protect the sheep - even if it was at the expense of his own comfort or safety.

Perhaps most of us are not too interested or concerned about sheep or shepherds. But we are concerned with our lives – we are concerned our futures – we are concerned about the world around us. We want many things - not the least of which is to be safe and secure. Consequently we are concerned with the direction that our leaders lead us. And I believe that the image of our scriptures

has something to say to all of us on a very practical level. The issue of shepherding and choosing good shepherds touches every aspect of our lives. This business of sheep and shepherds is about leading and following. There are leaders all around us that have a profound affect on our life and on our world. In many different way, each of us are called upon to take the roles of sheep or shepherd in most of what we do. - - - - Let me ask you a couple of very important questions when you are in the role of shepherd, leading / guiding others are you a good shepherd? And when you are in the role of a sheep following / depending on a shepherd are you following the right shepherd - a good shepherd?

In a book entitled, Everyday Discipleship for Ordinary People, Stuart Briscoe wrote about a young pastor who was officiating at the funeral of a war veteran. The dead man's military friends asked to have a part in the service at the funeral home. At an appointed time at the end of the service they asked the pastor to lead them down to the casket, stand with them for a solemn moment of remembrance, and then lead them out through the side door. All went well until they came to the exit and the pastor led them to the wrong door. With great military precision and dignity the whole group marched into a broom closet, in full view of the mourners. The retreat from the broom closet was not as dignified.

Are you following the right shepherds in your lives? On the surface, these scripture texts are such great 'feel good' scriptures. We love the images. It feels good to know that God is watching over us like a shepherd and leading us beside still waters and into green pastures. But I do hope that we look beyond these pleasant pictures of God and take them into the rest of our lives. I hope that we look at all of the shepherds all around us.

For me personally [and I hope for all of us] these words come as a great challenge. As I think of the image of shepherds I think of how often church folk have referred to their pastors as 'shepherds' and church members as sheep. Then the image leaves me with a feeling of grave responsibility. I try to accept the role and responsibility of shepherd and I pray for the strength and wisdom and compassion to be a good shepherd I try to look to the Good Shepherd for guidance on shepherding. As a shepherd thinking of the model Christ set, I know that first and foremost I am called to work to keep you safe. To guide you away from the dangers of the darkness - to try to lead you to green pastures. Being a pastor should never be about doing what the pastor wants because the pastor wants it. It is about shepherding. But pastors are not the only shepherds. And I will also call you to accept that role and responsibility of shepherding following the example of Christ where it is appropriate in your lives.

As young children we look to older siblings and to parents for shepherding. As school children we look to teachers and administrators as shepherds. As young adults, too often we look all over for shepherds. As citizens of a nation we look to government for shepherding. As members of organizations we appoint leaders -

in the church we call pastors and elect church councils. Hopefully, all bring some kind of leadership style - hopefully they all want to shepherd to flock.

I have always loved this little illustration. Once there was an ecumenical conference that was being held in a large city. Every imaginable denomination was in attendance for this unprecedented event. **One afternoon the gathering was in session when all of a sudden a secretary rushed in shouting, "The building's on fire! The building's on fire!"** Confusion reigned as each church group came together and did what came natural: **The Methodists gathered in the corner to pray. The Baptists cried, "Where's the water?"** The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessings that fire brings. The Lutherans posted a notice on the door declaring that the fire was evil. The Roman Catholics passed a plate to cover the damages. The Unitarians reasoned that the fire would burn itself out if just given the chance. The Congregationalists shouted, "Every man for himself." The Fundamentalists proclaimed, "It's the vengeance of God." The Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out. The Christian Scientists concluded that there was no real fire. The Presbyterians appointed a chairperson to appoint a committee to look into the matter and make a written report. And the church secretary grabbed a fire extinguisher and put the fire out.

The good shepherd leads and cares and seeks to protect. It is what our God does for us out of love. Look to the right shepherds - shepherds that know where the fire is as put it out - shepherd to love and seek to protect. One good shepherd does all of this - follow Him to the still waters. **AMEN**