

# Sermon for May 7, 2017 – “A Little Shepherd”

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A – Texts: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

## Westwood First Presbyterian Church

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Two men were called on to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. One was a professional orator trained in speech technique and drama. He recited the psalm in a powerful way. When he finished, the audience cheered and even asked for an encore, that they might hear his wonderful voice again. Then the other man who was much older repeated the same words: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...” But when he finished, no sound came from the large class. Instead, people sat in a deep mood of devotion and prayer. Then the first man, the orator, stood up. “I’ve a confession to make,” he said. “The difference between what you’ve just heard from my old friend, and what you heard from me is this...“I know the Psalm...“My friend knows the Shepherd.”

We all love the images here, but one problem with all references to sheep in the Bible is that so few of us have any real contact with them. The metaphor kind of gets lost on us. What does it mean to be compared to sheep? The little we’ve heard or read about them, that they’re not particularly bright, doesn’t exactly endear us to the metaphor. But the thing is it’s not about sheep at all. It **is** about a shepherd, the “Good Shepherd”. But even there the meaning can be lost on us.

You’re all familiar with the image: a smiling Jesus sitting under a tree, with a cute little lamb on His lap. Or maybe the one with Jesus standing, staff in hand, with a lamb in His arms. It’s a beautiful image. It’s a **safe** image. And, it’s a **true** image. It’s also a very **incomplete** image! The life of a shepherd was anything but glamorous or picturesque. Taking care of sheep was dangerous, difficult, tedious work. Shepherds were, as one commentator has said, “rough around the edges, spending time in the fields rather than in polite society. “For Jesus to say, ‘I am the good shepherd,’ would have been an affront to the religious elite. The claim had an edge to it. A modern-day equivalent might be for Jesus to say, ‘I am the good migrant worker.’” So, to understand what Jesus was really getting at here, you have to know the context. To whom was Jesus speaking when He called Himself the Good Shepherd? And what did it mean to **them**? Well, first, Jesus was **not** talking to His followers. He was addressing the Pharisees. They were accusing Him of being from the devil because He healed a blind man on the Sabbath. His response was that He was the Good Shepherd. Not like the hired hands who got paid to watch the sheep, the one who would abandon them in their time of need because they didn’t really care for them.

Now, the Jewish people had used the Good Shepherd image for God for thousands of years. It goes all the way back to Genesis 49:24. There we read that that Joseph was saved, “**by the power of the mighty one of Jacob, by the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, the God of your father...**” Such imagery was used by Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zechariah, and of course, by David in his Psalms. Psalm 80 begins, “**Shepherd of Israel, listen, guide of the flock of Joseph, from Your throne upon the cherubim, reveal Yourself...**” And, of course, there’s Psalm 23. So, the Pharisees knew **exactly** what Jesus meant.

He was claiming to be God. They also knew He was contrasting Himself to them, the hired hands entrusted to care for God's people but caring only for themselves. The Pharisees took a lot of abuse from Jesus, and rightly so. Still, it wasn't that they were particularly **bad** people. By most standards they were actually pretty decent people. Problem was, they'd gotten legalistic; too focused on the letter of the law. They'd lost sight of the spirit of the law, of Judaism itself. Jesus warned the people not to follow the example of the Pharisees. Instead, He offered them someone else to follow. He offers them the Good Shepherd.

The shepherd imagery pops up a good bit throughout the gospels. It showed up in our gospel reading (also from John) two weeks ago. You'll recall that Jesus and His apostles had just finished breakfast on the shore of Lake Tiberius, when Jesus asked Peter, **"Do you love Me?"** Peter answered, **"Yes Lord, You know I love You."** Then Jesus said, "Herd My lambs." Wait, sorry, that's not how that passage goes. Jesus didn't say, "herd My lambs," He said, **"feed My lambs!"** I should know that...sorry! I guess there **is** a difference, isn't there? A second time, Jesus asked Peter, **"Do you love Me?"** And a second time, Peter answered, **"Yes Lord, You know that I love You!"** And Jesus said, "Drive my sheep." Oops, I did it again. Jesus didn't say that either. He said, **"Tend My sheep."** I don't know how I could forget that. So, a third time, Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. By this time, Peter was more than a little embarrassed and hurt. He was probably feeling a little guilty too, being reminded as he was of his betraying Jesus three times. But the gospels report he merely said, **"Lord, You know everything, You know I love You."** Then Jesus said, "Keep My sheep in line, and for goodness sake make sure none of them have any fun!" I'm seeing the looks on some of your faces. Are you thinking Jesus didn't say that either? Alright, what did He say? He said, **"Feed My sheep."** That's it? **"Feed My sheep?"** You're sure there's nothing in there about keeping them in line? Well, how do you like that? What have all us successors of Peter been doing all these years? You mean my job and the job of the other leaders of this church, **isn't** to keep you on the straight and narrow? Well, what do you know? "Feed My sheep." How about that! Well, to me, that sounds like the job of a...a...a...a servant! Is **that** what we're supposed to be? Those called to lead in churches; pastors, elders, deacons, are called to be **servants**? Really?

Yes, that's **exactly** what we're supposed to be. But more than that, aren't we **ALL** called to serve the world? The "other sheep" as Jesus calls them. Those **NOT** in churches? You better believe it! That's why Jesus washed the feet of His apostles, to set an example of ministry for the shepherds that would come after Him. You know, some churches still do that on Maundy Thursday. But Jesus wasn't talking about once-a-year symbolism. He was talking about every-day, down-and-dirty, roll up your sleeves and get to work ministry. Unfortunately, some church leaders aren't shepherds, more like hired hands. Only in it for the power, the recognition, the attention, or the...well, you get the picture.

A shepherd in those days didn't walk behind the flock beating them with a stick to keep them moving although I'll bet there was a time or two when he wanted to. No, he walked in front of them, seeking out a safe path to food and water and shelter. What's more, the sheep followed him, because they recognized his voice, and they trusted him. Jesus tells us that's the kind of Good Shepherd He is. He leads. We follow.

Now, I'd love to talk about what it means to follow Jesus, but that's a sermon for another day. Today, I just want to emphasize that Jesus is the one we're to follow, nobody else. St. Peter never got up and said, "Hi, my name is Peter. I'm your new shepherd. You just follow me, do what I say, and everything will be fine." No, instead, he said, "that Jesus whom you crucified, He's the one you must follow." If we follow Peter, it's only because he's following Jesus too, and pointing to Him, and we happen to be going the same way. That's the way it is with us followers of Jesus, members of His flock. We're all called to have a little shepherd in us. If one of us falls, the rest of us stop and pick him or her up and put them on our shoulders. If one of us strays, the rest call out and point the way (as best we can). But we don't follow each other. Together, we follow Jesus, for there's but one flock, and one Shepherd.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.