

“The Lord is my shepherd...” Did you wonder why I asked all of us to read this psalm together today, instead of us just listening to it passively? Well, saying these words is different than hearing them. “The Lord is **MY** shepherd!” The pronouns are MY, ME, and I... With each of us reading this, we are each challenged to claim these pronouns as our own. The Lord is **MY** shepherd requires me to ask myself, “Do I really believe this?” Do I really believe that the Lord is the shepherd of **MY** life?

The interesting thing about this psalm, is that it is most often read when we gather to celebrate the life of a loved one who has died. Yet, this is not a psalm for the dead; it is a psalm for the living! Pay attention to how the psalm concludes, “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long!” I shall dwell, we shall dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives!

This image of God as a shepherd is not just found in this well-known psalm; it is found in multiple passages of Scripture from Genesis to the gospels; from the prophets to the epistles. God as shepherd points to God’s continual direction, guidance and care for our lives. God is the one who calls us and leads us out. God is the one who goes before us leading us to green pastures. God is the one who goes before us leading us safely home so that we can rest and be renewed, before God leads us out once again. “Whoever enters,” says Jesus, “... will come in and go out and find pasture.” There is a rhythm to following God, “a going out and a coming in,” as another psalmist writes. A rhythm that is orchestrated by the shepherd when we respond to the shepherd’s voice.

Our text in the Gospel of John, which includes Jesus as shepherd, is preceded by a healing story. A man blind from birth is healed by Jesus. Yet, the Pharisees are not convinced of his healing. They interrogate the man, suggesting that maybe he was never really blind. The Pharisees then question his parents, but his parents defer to their adult son out of fear. The Pharisees ask the man again, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” Exasperated with his answers, the Pharisees drive him out of the synagogue.

Jesus then seeks this man out whom he has healed and in doing so, some of the Pharisees overhear their conversation, which leads them to ask Jesus a question, “Surely, we are not blind, are we?”

What unfolds next is our chapter where Jesus identifies himself as the gate, the shepherd and the Good Shepherd. “Very truly, I tell you... the one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep,” says Jesus. Jesus self identifies as the shepherd of the sheep. And each of us proclaimed, “The Lord is my shepherd,” as we read Psalm 23 together, but do we listen to the shepherd’s voice?

I wonder how much you know about sheep and shepherds? Being a city kid, I went to the web and found a beginner’s guide to raising sheep. I had always heard that sheep weren’t too smart, but the site states, “It will dismiss the notion that sheep are stupid.” That is good news, because in our texts you and I are the sheep!

So, what makes sheep, sheep? Sheep are best known for their strong flocking and following instinct. Flocking is their instinctive method of protection, for there is safety in numbers from predators. Have you ever felt that you had safety in numbers? Children often stick together in groups on a school play yard. I know my sons stuck together with another young boy growing up who had some developmental challenges, so that he wouldn’t be bullied. There was safety in numbers. Of course, we adults do a good job of sticking together in groups

to feel safe, as well. We stick together with those who are like us, often insulating ourselves from those who we deem as other. Flocking behavior, that is, sticking together is not bad in and of itself, but as followers of the One True Shepherd we must never limit the size of the flock!

Another trait of sheep is that they follow a leader, when one sheep moves, the rest will follow. I remember following the lead of my older brother one summer. My older brother led me to a neighbor's back yard with a pool. He led me and his other friends, it's just that I didn't realize what he was leading me into! It wasn't until I heard him yell, "Run," that I realized he had lead us into trouble. I was only in the first grade when a police officer dragged all of us kids out of a pool of a recently sold home! Sheep follow the lead of the first sheep that moves, even if it is not a good idea. Hence their reputation for not being too smart. Their flocking instinct is so strong, that it can lead them into trouble if they are not listening to their shepherd, like the 400 sheep in eastern Turkey that plunged to their death, about ten years ago, following a single sheep that tried to cross a 15-meter deep ravine.

One last trait highlighted on this website is that sheep are social, they need to be with other sheep, within eye sight actually. Animal behaviorists have determined that five is the magic number for reducing stress among sheep. Less than five sheep cause distress and when a sheep is separated from the rest of the flock, it becomes highly agitated. Sheep need each other and I would like to suggest that God created us to need each other, to be in relationship with each other. To be stronger and more capable together, than apart!

Sheep flock, follow, and socialize, and in these passages, we are the sheep of God's flock! Given who we are in light of these passages, here are a few questions we need to explore: Why do we flock? How do we welcome others into our fold? And who do we follow?

I believe questions have a way of exposing us and the God whom we say we worship. Why do we flock? Why do we gather with whom we gather? This gathering for worship brings people of faith together with a common language – English. This evening's worship will bring people together around the common language of Indonesian. When we gather as the whole church to worship, our common faith brings us together across our language differences. This particular church, our fold, has room for all who seek to follow the shepherd, regardless of their language. Yet, how do we welcome those who are not like us? Are we willing to welcome those who might speak a different language or prefer a different worship style or cause us to consider other ways of being the church? This worship space suggests we have plenty of room to grow, yet will we welcome others into our fold? Why do we flock together?

Over fifty years ago Martin Luther King Junior brought to America's attention that the most segregated hour of the week, was when the Shepherd's sheep gathered for worship. He was referring to the racial divides, but divides occur by language, ethnicity, worship style, and more. It seems that God's sheep are constantly dividing and separating into separate flocks or folds, causing some to wonder who exactly are we following.

This leads us to this question, "Who do we follow?" In our passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus is identified in two ways, as the shepherd who enters by the gate, as well as the gate itself. How can Jesus be both gate and shepherd? What was Jesus trying to teach the Pharisees and in turn each of us?

The gate of a sheep fold is the point of entry and exit. It is through the gate that sheep are lead out to green pastures. It is through the gate that sheep are lead back into safety for a time of rest. Jesus is the way, we find in another chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus as the

gate is God's reconciling love for the world. Jesus is the gate, the way in and the way out that leads to abundant life for all. Jesus, as the gate, is not designed to keep out, to bar, or to reject, nor are we called to be the gatekeeper. "I am the gate," says Jesus, because reconciling love leads us to life that is really life.

Jesus is also the shepherd and in the Middle East a shepherd leads, rather than follows the flock. I saw this myself when I was in Bethlehem a few years back. A shepherd was out front, calling to the sheep so that they would follow his voice.

"The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... he goes ahead of them." When I think of God's people as sheep, I often see in churches what I call the holy huddles. Sheep safe and secure behind the closed gate of their particular church, for safe keeping. God's sheep get so comfortable that they would rather not be lead out. When the gate is opened each morning, they are inclined to ask for room service, rather than venture out for nourishment. They are comfortable. They are happy. They just want to stay inside with those whom they know, safe and secure within the walls of their church! As God's sheep gather together whether as Methodists or Congregationalists, Catholics or Episcopalians, Baptists or Presbyterians, it is so easy to forget that the shepherd leads the sheep out daily!

As God's sheep, we gather to worship in order to learn the shepherd's voice, so that we will not follow those who will try to harm or deceive us. We gather to worship in order to listen deeply to the shepherd's voice, so that we will not lead ourselves or others astray. Remember one sheep can lead a whole flock into danger! We gather in the safety of this worshipping fold, though, for the purpose of being led out into our communities. Our shepherd, Jesus the Christ, is out in front of us, calling each of us by name and beckoning us to life abundant that only happens, as we follow Christ's voice.

Ben Franklin once said, "A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small bundle." A woman wrapped up in herself makes a very small package, too. The same holds true for a church. A church wrapped up itself is a very small package. A church wrapped up in itself will be unlikely to leave the safety of the fold and be lead out into the green pastures of the community. Even though Jesus is out in front, even though Jesus goes before us, even though Jesus is calling our name, a church wrapped up in itself will play it safe and not venture out.

I trust we are not a church wrapped up in itself, for the shepherd is calling our name and leading us out!

Do you remember the psalm we read together as we opened the pages of scripture this morning? We each declared, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want!"

Let's not want just safety. Let's not want just security. Let's not settle for what is and want only what we have. "I shall not want," we confessed.

The Lord our shepherd will provide direction, guidance and care. Let's trust the rhythm the shepherd is orchestrating for our lives, the going out and the coming in. The Lord, our shepherd, is out in front. Let's follow the shepherd and be led out so that others may come to know the love and care of the shepherd as we do. Amen!