

Psalm 23  
John 10:1-10

“Dependent on the Shepherd”

R.P.C.  
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Daniel D. Robinson, Pastor

Today is that Sunday in Eastertide traditionally known as “Shepherd Sunday.” That means all the scriptures suggested by the lectionary, in one way or another, contain the image of sheep and shepherd. If you will notice the Gospel of John compares Jesus to a shepherd – a very good, compassionate and caring shepherd. But that means the text also compares us to sheep – dumb sheep. That’s not especially flattering .....

“I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus. It’s the same image used in today’s beloved and oft-quoted Psalm 23 – “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....” As the Psalm further explains it, the shepherd leads me beside still waters ... restores, prepares, protects. This Psalm is beloved, to be sure, and often quoted and used, especially at funerals ... so what is a preacher like me supposed to do with such a familiar text as that?

A recent survey of mainline Protestant congregations asked, “What do you want out of a sermon?” The main response? ... “I want sermons that I can use in my daily life.” As one responder added, “Preachers are always telling us to get out and do something but never give us the specifics.”

Thus a very popular preacher says that we ought to come to church with a pencil and paper in hand. He suggests that the mark of a good sermon is if a person can write down two of three things to formulate into an “action plan” by the end of the sermon. In other words, the theory is that a sermon’s intent is to assist the hearer to develop an “action plan.” I guess there is a certain attraction to such a ‘purpose’ for a sermon. After all, we like thinking of ourselves as active, resourceful, competent, caring, hands-on Christians. We want to be ‘doers’ and not ‘hearers’ only of the word. So it is only reasonable to assume that we would be given an “action plan,” an assignment for the week –something we can do, and accomplish, and measure, and evaluate....

Well you can forget about that approach for this week! Remember, this is Shepherd Sunday, and even though we might want to receive an “action plan” for this week, the most important thing for us to do with these texts is to listen to the scriptures. Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Note... there is nothing in that text that demands that WE DO anything; the implication being that, since we are the sheep as today’s gospel

suggests, we are to be passive, for we are the recipients of HIS –the shepherd’s - action.

We might be pressed to wonder, why didn’t Jesus use a different analogy ... say something like, “I am the great teacher, and you are my brilliant students. You disciples can do anything you put your minds to - even pass the religious FCAT’s, SAT’s or GRE exams - so study hard this week as your action plan.”

Or, “Or I am the do-gooder, and you are all my valuable do-gooders, so when you leave here, go out and... do good.” Or, “I am the CEO of this organization called the church. You are my second level managers. You are called to be out working the floor and contacting the customers, supposedly providing good customer service. So look busy now, and make those personal contacts as your action plan this week.”

No.... What Jesus said was, “I am the loving, searching, seeking, self- sacrificial shepherd...” “And you... well, you are the wayward, inept, wandering, lost, totally-dependent-on-me, docile, dumb and domesticated sheep.” Wow!!! As so many times with God’s word, which comes as a two-edged sword, this declaration too is not only difficult to hear, but painfully cutting, direct ... AND TRUTHFUL– maybe more truthful that we would ever admit. “I’m the good shepherd; you’re my dumb, lost sheep...” Now there is an assault on just everything we believe about ourselves – a metaphorical affront to the way we enjoy thinking about ourselves.

Then Jesus goes on to raise the definition of the “good shepherd” to the nth degree. He says, “...the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” What a way to treat a shepherd who is merely going about his business keeping his sheep.... The letter of I Peter says that this shepherd is the “guardian of your souls.” Even in the more serene 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the flock is not always safe and requires the dangerous work of the shepherd. When in the “darkest valley” it is good for the sheep to be assured that the shepherd is with them even there.

But laying down one’s life for dumb sheep? Isn’t that a bit extreme? It would be extreme if not for that unique bond that exists between this Good Shepherd and HIS sheep. What Jesus is emphasizing here is the intense and personal nature of his care for us – of his willingness to even sacrifice his own life for the sake of wayward sheep. Thus, the Shepherd’s purpose is for our safety – for the living of our lives.

Though polls still say that an overwhelming majority of North Americans believe in God, that doesn’t necessarily mean they believe God has a PURPOSE for them, nor they a purpose for God – so writes Douglas Porpora, author of *Landscape of the Soul*. Many of those surveyed found God to be what Porpora calls a “cipher.”

By that he means that when many people say ‘there is a God,’ they mean there is an ultimate Someone to whom ‘what we do here’ might or might not matter. And if we will notice, these same people never talk of experiencing God on a personal, relational level. Even in those who professed a belief in God, Porpora heard deep confusion, hence they are still ‘figuring it out, or “ciphering” as he puts it....

From a woman who professed to being “not religious” though she is a member of the Lutheran Church, he was told: “ I guess there is a God – I suppose there has to be a supreme being; but what God is like, I have no idea.” From a man educated in Catholic schools, Porpora heard: “You know, I was taught there was a God. But if I grew up in an environment where I was taught there wasn’t a God, I’d probably believe there wasn’t a God.” A young physics major said: “I’m pretty sure there is a God, but that could change tomorrow. Life is different for everybody. Therefore, you can’t say it has one definite purpose.”

Did you notice what is absent here in these equivocations? There is no recognition of a relationship to the Living God. All that mattered to these surveyed persons was the meaning of their own individual experience and existence. There was no mention of a relationship to God on a personal level. Any reference to a Shepherd/sheep relationship, therefore, would make no sense - there would be no REASON, no PURPOSE for such a relationship.

It also means that if there is no relationship there is no accountability. If the only meaning in life is my own individual experience, then I only have to answer to myself. And the only purpose or reason to life is to take care of myself and my own needs until the end of life.

So what happened to the answer we are given from the very first question from the Westminster Larger Catechism? To modernize the language: “What is the chief end of humanity?” The answer is: “(Humanity’s) chief and highest end is to glorify God, and to enjoy (God) forever.” Now if that is not one definite, definitive PURPOSE, I don’t know what is....

The Gospel of John, from which we are working today, is unique from the other gospels. In fact, John’s Gospel might be best thought of as one, long sermon. If we try to reduce John’s gospel to a biography or merely a report on history, it will come across as dry and boring. That’s because John doesn’t just want to inform us about the facts ABOUT Jesus; John wants to convert us into faith IN Jesus so that we will be enticed to follow Jesus.

Among the lessons that I as a preacher have learned from the Gospel of John over the years is that my job as a preacher is not to “dumb Jesus down.” When

we share a passage from John, there is bound to be a good bit of squirming in the pews and in the pulpit. But, I dare not use the sermon to say, in effect, “Settle down now. I can sense that Jesus has made us all a bit confused and uncomfortable. So I’m going to tell you what Jesus is TRYING to say if, like me, he had the benefit of a seminary education.”

If I did that, I would be implying that after my skilled explanation, we will all cease to be bothered as much by what Jesus said. So we can all go home now having had some sort of vague spiritual experience rather than being challenged by the living, still demandingly present Christ.

No, rather than attempt to explain Jesus, John presents him in all of his wondrous mysteriousness. Rather than close the gap between us and Jesus, John opens that gap, so that once we see John’s portrayal of Jesus in action we are left saying, “I guess I didn’t know Jesus as well as I first thought.

The purpose of a sermon is not to preach ABOUT Jesus; it is to preach Jesus. That is why there is a plaque attached to the back of this pulpit that reads: “We would see Jesus.” It’s a reminder that I dare not present Jesus as an intellectual problem to be solved, but rather to let Jesus speak to us through his stunning, challenging, real presence. What we really need from a sermon is not a set of simple ideas ABOUT Jesus that we can formulate into an ‘action plan’; what we need is Jesus. Thus the German, Christian martyr, Deitrich Bonhoffer said that the purpose of a sermon is to allow the risen Christ to walk among his people; the Shepherd among the sheep.

From where I stand up here, I can almost imagine Christ roaming the isles, stopping unexpectedly, often at a pew where some innocent person is listening passively – then tapping them on the shoulder, or ‘whopping them upside the head,’ to wake them up and enlist them; calling them in that moment by name into his service. As a preacher, I marvel at John’s willingness to let mysterious Jesus stay a mystery – to present Christ in such a way that it frustrates any simple explanation.

Do you remember how Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night, and how this ‘learned man’ entered into a discussion with Jesus? After Jesus told him that he needed to be born from above and needed to be born by the spirit, Nicodemus - who thought he was smart enough to “cipher” Jesus - became all the more confused – just like ... well like a dumb sheep... The point being that Jesus apparently didn’t want Nicodemus to “figure Jesus out” and learn ABOUT him; he wanted Nicodemus to follow him as the Good Shepherd who leads, and is willing to give his life, even to Nicodemus.

A college chaplain was sitting across from a young student who had, the weekend before, made a terrible mistake. The young man had been under the influence of alcohol; but as he candidly admitted his misdeeds, he acknowledged that alcohol could not be used as an excuse.

The chaplain said, "What were you thinking?"

"How long have you been a college chaplain?" responded the student.

"Twelve, maybe thirteen years," the chaplain replied.

"That long? I would have thought by now you would have learned more about students. If I HAD been thinking, I wouldn't have done what I did!"

"Wise observation," retorted the chaplain.

Finally the student said, "I just thank God that Jesus died for sinners... them that knows, and them that don't know... and all of them that do dumb things." And with that, the student wept.

Jesus got it right when he said, "I know my own and my own know me." Who are we? Just check out the front page of any morning newspaper and you will soon see our collective idiocy. In our more honest moments we know that we are sheep – stupid, thoughtless, wayward, wandering sheep.

And who is God? God is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for this same bunch of stupid, wayward, wandering sheep. All that we dumb, wayward sheep know for sure is this: "The Lord is my shepherd ... he makes me lie down ... he leads me... he comforts me... he prepares a table for me ...he anoints me ... he grants me goodness and mercy."

Oh... O, how we need him..... Amen.