

Psalm 23

John 10: 1-18

Be A Smart Sheep

John uses many images in his Gospel, in today's reading it is Jesus as a shepherd. Like a shepherd, Jesus is concerned with the welfare and the care of His sheep. The shepherd loves his sheep. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. He didn't call himself King Jesus...He didn't call himself President Jesus...He didn't call himself Commissioner Jesus...He didn't call himself Mayor Jesus...Doctor Jesus...Reverend Jesus...Deacon Jesus...Or Chairman Jesus....

But he called himself a shepherd...A servant... A caretaker...A watchman...A provider...He called himself a shepherd... That's what really stands out in my mind. We are his people and the sheep of his pasture...

We depend on God, for everything...And just as a shepherd watches over his sheep...So does God watch over his children...

Two caretakers are mentioned in this account, the Good Shepherd, and the hired hand. The hired hand had no connection with the sheep, no relationship with the sheep. He thought of himself first and the sheep last. If a sheep was attacked by a wolf, or lost, oh well.

Then there is the good shepherd. The good shepherd is the owner of the sheep.

He has a special relationship with them. Most owners didn't own a lot of sheep. A flock of 100 was huge. Most flocks were no larger than 10-20. Sheep were like valued pets. There was nothing about their sheep that the good shepherd did not know. The individual sheep in a flock all look alike to the untrained eye. A good shepherd, however, can tell them apart-- often because of their markings or peculiar traits.

A shepherd was explaining this to a friend who was surprised by his familiarity with each animal. "See that sheep over there?" he asked. "Notice how it's feet toe in a little.

The one behind it walks kind of sideways; the next one has a patch of wool off its back; there's one with a black mark below its eye, while the one closest to us has a small piece torn out of its ear.

He knew each by name. These were not just sheep; they were Patch, Tag, Nosey, and so on. By day and night, the shepherd lived with them. He was always there for them.

You see, a shepherd, in order to know his sheep and care for them, has to live among them. He has to be close to them. Jesus came from heaven to earth to be close to His sheep. The Good Shepherd became a sheep, took on our nature, and lived life just like us (except without sin). That's why He is the good Shepherd.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows the peculiar traits of His flock and watches over us with love and concern.

A cemetery has a tombstone that bears the following epitaph:

Pause Stranger, when you pass me by, As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be, So prepare for death and follow me.

An unknown passer-by scratched the following reply underneath:

To follow you I'm not content, Until I know which way you went!

Shepherds go before their flock; they lead their flock, never asking them to do anything that they wouldn't do first. "...and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

Even though flocks may mingle together, each flock knew its own shepherd's voice, and each would follow its own shepherd and no other.

Story. A man in Australia was arrested and charged with stealing a sheep. But he vigorously protested that it was one of his own that had been missing for many days. When the case went to court, the judge didn't know how to decide the matter. Finally, he asked that the sheep be brought into the courtroom. Then he ordered the plaintiff to step outside and call the animal. The sheep made no response except to raise its head and look frightened.

The judge then instructed the defendant to go to the courtyard and call the sheep.

When the accused man began to make his distinctive call, the sheep ran toward the door and that voice. It was obvious that he recognized the familiar voice of his master. "His sheep knows him," said the judge. "Case dismissed!"

My sheep know my voice. . .

True story. "Announcer Dave Johnson had been a horse racing commentator for ABC-TV in the USA. When away from the horse races he does a great deal of commercial and voice-over work.

"I tried out for a spot in a commercial where they wanted someone to say, 'They're off!'" Johnson recalls. 'The casting director told me, 'I want you to sound like the guy who calls the Kentucky Derby.'

"No problem,' I said. 'I am the guy who calls the Kentucky Derby.' I figured I was a cinch to get the part. The funny thing is—I didn't! Apparently, there was someone who sounded more like me than I did."

Returning to our passage, Jesus, in this chapter, describes a sheep pen. It had only one door. When the sheep returned to the fold at night after a day of grazing in the pleasant pastures, the shepherd stood in the doorway and inspected each one with tender care as it entered. If a sheep was scratched or wounded by thorns, the shepherd would anoint it with oil to facilitate healing.

If they were thirsty, he gave them water. After all had been counted and brought into the pen, the shepherd would lay across the doorway so no intruder could enter. The shepherd thus became the door. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who protects and sustains the life of the sheep. Jesus said, "I am the gate for the sheep."

The distinguishing mark between the good shepherd and the hired hand is that the good shepherd would lay down his life for the sheep. He was their protector.

When Jesus laid down His life for the sheep, He saved us from the destroying wolves of sin and death. He gave His life to kill them and take away their power so they couldn't destroy the flock.

But if the story ended here, we'd have a problem. If a flock of sheep lose their shepherd

because he laid down his life to save them from a pack of wolves, they are now shepherd-less. And even if no more wolves come, soon they'll wander off and get lost. And the death of the shepherd will have been in vain.

But the story doesn't end here with the shepherd dead, and the sheep scattered. Verse 18 tells us why: No man takes my life from Me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again. I have received this command from My Father.

Under the Old Testament law, the sheep died for the shepherd, but now the Good Shepherd dies for the sheep!

In the book, "Chicken Soup for the Soul", Eric Butterworth tells the story of a college professor who had his sociology class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories of 200 young boys. The students were asked to write an evaluation of each boy's future. In every case the students wrote, "He hasn't got a chance."

Twenty-five years later another sociology professor came across this earlier study.

He had his students do follow up on the same 200 boys who were now men. With the exception of 20 boys who had moved away or died, the students learned that 176 of the remaining 180 had achieved more than ordinary success as lawyers, doctors, and businessmen. The professor was astounded and decided to pursue the matter further.

Fortunately, all the men were in the area and he was able to ask each one, "How do you account for your success?" In each case the reply came with feeling, "There was a teacher." The teacher was still alive, so he sought her out and asked the old but still alert lady what magic formula she had used to pull these boys out of the slums into successful achievement.

The teacher's eyes sparkled, and her lips broke into a gentle smile. "It's really very simple," she said. "I loved those boys."

Their success was based on the love of a teacher.

Our success as followers of Jesus is based on the love of a shepherd who was willing to lay down his life for us.

He loved us enough that our sinfulness became his burden.

He loved us enough that his perfect rightness became ours.

He loved us enough to suffer on the cross for us. To save us from eternal death. To prepare us to meet His Father. He will keep us safe in the sheepfold if we're smart sheep and follow the Good Shepherd.

Amen.