

"One Flock, One Shepherd."

Acts 4:5-12; Ps. 23; John 10:11-18
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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There are any number of reasons why someone might be late for work or for school or for church. Chances are (around here at least) getting stuck behind a flock of sheep is probably not one of them. We don't come into contact with sheep outside of the petting zoo or a farm here or there. We don't encounter shepherds that often either.

Our image of shepherds and sheep is romanticized and idealized, formed from pictures of Jesus with the lambs in his arms or the image of a quiet pasture punctuated with woolly white backs moving like small cumulus clouds across a green sky.

But shepherding can be dangerous work. Before he stood up to Goliath, young David reassured King Saul and the Israelite army that his experience tending sheep and using his slingshot against lions and bears was good training for standing up to a well-armed adversary like the giant Goliath.

In modern day Palestine one will often see a shepherd with a gun slung over his shoulder and a pair of binoculars around his neck. Shepherding is not for the faint of heart or the fearful.

Back in Jesus' day being a shepherd was not high on anyone's list of sought-after jobs. The shepherd was one of the lowest members of that society and was considered unclean and unrighteous. The reason is simple: The shepherd could not control whose crop his sheep might help themselves to. Therefore, he could never repay what the sheep had stolen from his neighbors. If one could not make restitution on a debt one could not be considered a righteous person.

But, the fact that the unclean Bethlehem Shepherds are the first to hear of Jesus' birth tells us something about how God views our social rankings.

The fact that the term "shepherd" is often associated with the role of the king or of the religious leaders also tells us the power of the image when it is properly used.

The fact that Jesus calls himself "the Good Shepherd" tells us both that he is willing to associate with the lowest on the social ladder and also claim kingship and authority as his role and his due.

In calling himself the Good Shepherd we know there have to be other shepherds for whom the term "Good" is not applicable. What are the characteristics of the Good shepherd? Being trustworthy and loyal to the flock is one criterion. Knowing the sheep by name and being known by them is another.

Psalm 23 gives us a pretty good idea of what it means to have the Lord as our Shepherd and tells us what we can expect from God's leadership. This shepherd of whom the psalmist writes is a constant presence in the lives of the sheep. Whether the path leads to green pastures or through the valley of the shadow of death, there is no need to fear because of the overwhelming comfort brought about by the steady presence of the divine Shepherd.

Jesus enlarges this image of the Shepherd who will not abandon the sheep even in times of extreme danger. Unlike the hired hand, the Good Shepherd, the Model Shepherd, has one overriding quality:

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Did you notice how many times Jesus mentions this particular characteristic of the Good Shepherd? No less than 5 times in just 7 verses.

It's part of the job description that Jesus has accepted as God's Messiah. The Good Shepherd is willing to make this total sacrifice on behalf of his sheep. Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for us tells us how valuable we are - each one of us - in God's sight.

It is this Good Shepherd's voice that has drawn us together and made us one "flock". He is the point of contact, the unifying center.

Take a look around at the rest of the flock. We are but a small slice of the Church. Even though we may look pretty similar on the outside, there is an incredible diversity among us in age, education, background, interests, needs, family situations, attitude toward God and the Church, to name but a few areas.

Now multiply us by the length and breadth and height and depth of Christ's Church and we quickly see that there is nothing that can possibly unite us all, nothing that we can do to provide unity.

Only God makes it possible, and not only possible, but a reality. We are a living example of the power of God's love shown in Jesus Christ to gather us together from all walks of life, from many flocks into the one Church - that one flock with One Shepherd at its head - our Risen Savior.

We need to remember that our unity is not found in our similarities. Our peace is not found in our ability to get along with one another. Our purity is not a function of how good we are. All of these are found in Christ. He is our unity. He is our purity. He is our peace. He is the head and the heart of who we are.

Each day our diversity becomes more and more apparent and our unity in Christ more and more crucial. Things are changing more rapidly now than at any time in our lifetimes. It sometimes seems like the sheep are scattering, going off every which way following new creeds or no creeds, exploring new forms of worship which (to some) seem to have nothing worshipful about them whatsoever.

Young people are doing what young people always do: questioning traditions, trying out new paths, going their own way. Mega churches are springing up and the old denominational boundaries are falling down.

Surrounded by so much change there is a need now more than ever to stay close to the Good Shepherd, to learn to recognize his voice in the midst of a cacophony of sounds, and to know which paths to choose when there are so many seemingly worthwhile and good spiritual paths to follow.

In a world of change it is good to know we still have the message of Jesus Christ which remains the same yesterday, today and forever. He supplies the common ground that gives us room to breathe, to relax and let go of the fears that might make us want to scatter like sheep or put our heads in the sand like ostriches. He frees us from the need to try and save ourselves and from the fear that we will never measure up, never amount to much, never be loved or wanted.

God, in Christ, is the Good Shepherd who never stops looking for us, always is on guard for us, and wins us over in faithful, self-giving love. God, in Christ, is also the one who challenges our notions of who is loved and who is not. Our tiresome theological turf battles in which we try to determine with absolute assurance who is "in" and who's "out" of the flock only serve to move us farther and farther away from the

voice of the Shepherd who says: "Love one another, as I have loved you."

We can get so caught up in our own little segment of the flock that we forget Jesus' words: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one Shepherd."

This is the promise of God in Christ. This is our point of unity and trust. We know that God has been faithful in the past. We know that the one in whom we have put our trust has loved us with an everlasting love. When we follow the Good Shepherd we are led away from fear and into the fullness and joy of the ever-widening fellowship of the people of God.

Friends, there is room in this flock known as Chapel Lane for any who wish to be shepherded by Jesus "beyond their wants, beyond their fears, from death into life."

And, there are countless opportunities for us to practice the welcome of Christ as we listen for the voice of the Shepherd who calls us by name and welcomes us to this feast where goodness and mercy are available to us in full measure, all the days of our life.

Thanks be to God!