

Community Church of Issaquah

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Good Sheep and Good Shepherd

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Perhaps one of the most difficult parts of reading and preaching from the Bible is that it's hard to identify with at times. Today's passages from the Scriptures talks about sheep. I've never been close enough to a sheep to touch one and know little about them. But did you know that in the Bible, sheep are mentioned more than 500 times, the word "flock" appears more than 200 times, and the word shepherd is one of the most common references to what someone does in life. For years I wondered why all this talk about sheep and shepherds. Then I visited the areas outside of cities like Jerusalem, Bethlehem and more, and on every hillside, there were herds of sheep with a shepherd standing or sitting nearby. It began to make sense. We write about what we know, this is what the writers of the Scriptures knew about – sheep.

Often, members of a congregation or followers of a particular person are called sheep. Personally, with many years as a pastor, I never thought of myself as a shepherd or the members of my church as sheep. I did have a member once who said the same thing every week as I shook his hand as he left the sanctuary. "Vincent, you're the best 'pasture' we ever had." I was flattered to think he viewed me as a shepherd leading my flock to better places to be. Then I realized he was just giving a Kansas pronunciation of the title, 'pastor.'

Sometimes when I am reading some passages of the Bible, I have questions about what might be missed in a story or more. We all know about the shepherds who were minding their flocks outside Bethlehem when an angel came to them and told them about the baby Jesus being

born. The part of that story I have questions about is how these men could leave their flocks and go off into the city. Who was left to watch them to ensure their safety? And what happened during the time when the shepherds were gone until they returned to their jobs? Since it was God who used the angels to tell them to go find Jesus, did God make sure the sheep were ok?

The same question comes to my mind when we read the story about the one lost sheep. We know that the shepherd left the 99 sheep and went out in search of the one lost. Who was there to care for his sheep while he was out doing what he should be doing? Is God always the one who covers the sheep with care and makes sure nothing happens to them? I know this sounds silly to you but each of these stories has questions for me and I am left to wonder, who cared for the sheep when there was no shepherd?

The story of the one sheep that was lost, then found is one that is evident in its message. If one person in one hundred is lost, the shepherd – God – will seek that one until it is found. And once found, there will be great rejoicing. But there is a lot more to that story if we delve deeper. Though this passage and others like it focus on the sheep, hidden in this parable is the lesson we can learn about the shepherd. In these verses, the shepherd is the Lord seeking the lost. But in our everyday world, we sometimes fail to pay attention to those who are in a place of shepherding the sheep, or followers of Christ.

The passages today are not so much about sheep as they are about the shepherd. The analogy is a familiar one to the people of that day. They understood quite well that a shepherd was someone with the responsibilities of watchful caring of a flock of sheep. The writers of the Bible and people in general knew what a shepherd was to do, and if the reference was to shepherding people, then it was even more important.

God's message through the prophet Jeremiah is abundantly clear. If a shepherd scatters or drives away the flock, there will be a huge price to pay. As God says it, "So I will attend to you for your evil doings." If you were a shepherd or leader, would you take that to mean that if you harm the sheep, you'll be in really big trouble with the Lord?

Throughout the history of humankind, people (I'll use that word instead of sheep for a few minutes if you don't mind) have trusted in a person believing that person is sent from God with a message they need to hear. As a minister, I know that when I stand to preach the Gospel, I need to both honestly and correctly speak up for the Lord. I am well aware that if I fail in that, there is always a price to pay, so I work hard to simply preach what Christ teaches. I make a solid effort not to twist the words for my own benefit. I take seriously the words of Joe Friday from the old TV program that probably none of you remember. Joe the detective would tell anyone he was questioning, "Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts."

Sometimes however, there are shepherds who want to interpret the Scriptures for their own good, and their trusting and believing flock swallow every word. I won't mention the current flock following the current host of shepherds. I don't have to. There are other examples. Way back in 1978, a very well-respected preacher named Jim Jones had built quite a following for himself as an evangelist. He had been appointed Chairman of the San Francisco Housing Commission by then mayor, George Moscone. When he had moved his followers from the Bay Area to Guyana, problems emerged when the truth about his new colony called Jonestown arose and the US government was asked to step in and do something.

When a US Congressman and some of the relatives of some followers were murdered after touring the facilities by some of Rev. Jones guards,

news spread quickly, and a decision was made to either take all the 918 people in the compound to Russia or to order a mass suicide. All 918 of Jim Jones followers died that day in 1978, including 304 children. One fact often overlooked was that 70 percent of those who died were Black. It was the largest single loss of civilian life until 9/11. Tragic results of sheep following the wrong shepherd.

In 1993, a young man named Vernon Howell, a member of the Seventh Day Adventist tradition had maneuvered his way into a leadership position within a break-away group called the Branch Davidian. Believing that the apocalypse or end of the world was near, they gathered followers and eventually located just outside of Waco, Texas at an encampment called Mount Carmel. Proclaiming that God has spoken to him in a vision, Howell changed his name to David Koresh and established himself as God's spokesperson. Women followers were instructed that they could have sexual relations only with him and their husbands must remain celibate. He fathered at least 14 children by these women and girls as young as 13. He claimed that God had told him he could lead this flock. And many believed him, though I do not know how or why.

The ATF and FBI became concerned about a buildup of guns and weapons and secured a warrant to search the groups of the facilities. An exchange of gunshots left several agents and Davidians dead, and a standoff resulted that lasted for 51 days. The assault on the compound was deadly. The Mount Carmel Center building caught fire amidst all the gun fire, agents and followers were shot, and as a result of the chaos, 76 people perished, including infants and children.

These are extreme examples, of course, of people blindly following a leader they believe to be a messenger of God. The verses in Samuel's prophecy are clear that the Lord will attend to those shepherds and

leaders who have scattered or driven away any of the flock. It was a warning for shepherds to beware of ill-doing. I believe it still applies today to any who would lead God's sheep astray. They will pay a price.

But there is beautiful promise that you and I need to claim as our own, especially in these days when we see so many blindly following leaders who consistently do damage to God's flock – His sheep. The Lord says, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock; I will bring them back into their fold; I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing." God will send His shepherd to seek the one lost sheep while the other 99 wait for all to be reunited.

Here are some lessons to learn from the Scriptures we heard today:

- Each of us can consider ourselves as sheep when we are in a gathering of believers, and we are called to be good sheep. When the shepherd left the 99 and went in search of the one lost, the 99 evidently waited patiently for the one lost. Likewise, we must patiently wait for one who is lost or strays, relying on a powerful shepherd to bring the fold together again.
- Each of us who seek to be the sheep of the Good Shepherd, must be wise to put our trust in the one whom we believe God sent to shepherd us. We must follow the one who is giving oversight of our flock when we know positively that that shepherd is indeed sent by God to keep us safe and in the fold.
- Each of us can know that when we have a Good Shepherd, we will be brought back into the flock and will be returned to our family of good sheep. When lost, the Good Shepherd will come and find us. That's God's promise.

I am clinging to that promise, and as I do, I am becoming more focused on my own role as a minister, pastor, or shepherd. I believe I am compelled to preach only the true Gospel of Christ, the Gospel of love and a Gospel that is welcoming and caring, a Gospel where we can all graze in fruitful fields and be fed. And I believe that those who believe that Gospel and follow in the steps of Christ are truly His sheep. Each of us should remind ourselves of one unshaken truth, it was found in our reading of the 23rd Psalm this morning. Do you remember it? “The Lord is MY shepherd” or as it was translated, “You, Lord are My shepherd.” We must never forget that. Never.