

A SHEEP'S LIFE A SERMON ON JOHN 10:1-21

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

John 9 shows what happens when Jesus gets hold of you. The story of the blind man was a tale of a close encounter with Christ — but one that afterwards, you are never the same again. You see in John 9 a unique story, and clues that our own story isn't finished yet and that when we tell our story, we'll encounter opposition.

Moving to John 10, Jesus uses the image of the shepherd to draw a contrast between his leadership and that of the Pharisees who interrogated the man healed by Jesus.

Because the Ancient Near East was primarily an agricultural society, the shepherd was a common figure in literature from the whole region. The Old Testament uses the image of the shepherd to indicate God's care for Israel. Think of Psalm 23 "the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...." In addition to God, the kings and other leaders of Israel were also pictured as shepherds of the people in their role of protecting, defending, and guiding the people. *However*, as we saw in our Advent series on the prophets, priests, and kings of Israel, the leadership of Israel became corrupt. Hear this example from Ezekiel 34:1-6, which uses Shepherd imagery to convey God's displeasure with the leadership of Israel.

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: `This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

God judges the shepherds of Israel for abusing their power, taking advantage of the people, and letting them wander from God. But a little later in Ezekiel 34, picking up at verse 11, God makes an interesting promise:

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

God promises to be chief shepherd — he will care for the people and bless them. He goes on to talk about administering justice and finally ends up here in verses 22-24.

I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Hear that — God promises to put a son of David on the Throne and make him a good shepherd. In Ezekiel, God both promises that He will be the shepherd and the son of David will be the shepherd. And in John 10, we find Jesus making the perfect fulfillment of those promises.

It's obvious from Scripture that Jesus is our Shepherd, but the main point we struggle to remember is that we are sheep. And this passage today gives us insights on what it means to live life as sheep.

SHEEP PERCEIVE THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE (10:3-5)

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them (John 10:1-7).

In verses 3-5, we see that the sheep hear and recognize the shepherd's voice. This image comes from the shared sheep pens of the Middle East. A number of townspeople would hire a watchman to guard the pen, and they would combine all their flocks together. Each individual shepherd would go in and call out the sheep that belonged to him in particular. They recognizing their master's voice would come out of the larger sheep pen and follow him. And that's another interesting part of the image — shepherds in the Middle East don't drive their animals from behind — they lead them.

Note that hearing as part of this image implies following. Hearing the master is more than just using your ears. It's more than understanding the message with the brain. It's about receiving it, accepting it, making it a part of who you are, and obeying it. Anyone can read the Bible and comprehend the message, but only a sheep can take it to heart and follow its commands. James 1:22-25 makes this truth clear.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.

The Prince of Grenada, the heir to the Spanish crown, was sentenced to life confinement in Madrid's dreary prison known as "The Place of the Skull". He was given only one book to read the entire time.... the Bible. He read it hundreds of times — and when he died after 33 years in prison, the guards who cleaned

out his cell found his notes that he had made writing on the prison wall with a nail. Do you know what the notes said? Things like “Psalm 118:8 is the middle verse in the Bible; Ezra 7:21 contains all the letters of the alphabet except the letter J; the ninth verse of the eighth chapter of Esther is the longest verse in the Bible.” After 33 years of exposure to the Shepherd’s voice in the Scriptures, all the Prince of Grenada found was meaningless trivia. From all we know about him, he never made a commitment to Christ. ¹ He never seized on the grace and hope that permeate the scriptures. He never heard the Shepherd’s voice.

Do you yearn to hear the voice of the shepherd? Do you long to hear the voice of the one who cares so deeply for you? You have it here in worship. That’s why I charge you to forget about the burdens of the week and forget about what’s coming up later today and rest here for a moment. Hear his Word come to you through the music and the fellowship, and the words and the physical space. You have it in your own private worship as you search the Scriptures and pray. The Shepherd’s voice is right here in the Bible, dripping with his words of grace from cover to cover. If you want to hear the shepherd’s voice more clearly, then I challenge you, if you don’t do so already, to be in the scriptures and in prayer every day. It doesn’t have to be too long — 15 minutes at the start of every day. I promise you if you incorporate daily bible reading and prayer as a habit in your life, your relationship with Jesus Christ will go to a new level.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD PROTECTS THE SHEEP FROM HARM (v. 8, 11-13)

If sheep perceive the shepherd’s voice, then the shepherd also protects them. Look at verses 8-13.

All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

The shepherd lays down his life for the sheep to protect against outside predators. Now here we are talking spiritually, so Jesus protects us from spiritual predators. Specifically, we’re talking Satan. Now I know that the use of that word calls up images of comical figures in red tights with pitchforks. Since that image

¹ Story told in Leonard Sweet’s *AquaChurch* pg 58-59.

is ridiculous, some dismiss the whole idea of Satan. But don't be fooled. The scriptures make clear that there is a very real force of evil in the world and it is very personal. And it wants to destroy your soul. Peter, Jesus' right hand man, knew that truth and expressed it in chapter 5 of his first letter.

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings (vs. 8-9).

You don't believe in a personal force that seeks to destroy your spirit? Then explain to me about the thoughts that keep you up at night. Explain to me those thoughts that pop suddenly in your head and you don't know where they came from. Explain to me the voice in the back of your head that says, when you suffer a slight wrong, "They meant full well to do that!" or "What did that snide glance **really** mean?" or "You don't like that tone of voice and you shouldn't put up with it!" Or even worse, explain to me that voice in the back of your head that says, when you fail "Typical. You're worthless. You should be ashamed. You're a phony and everyone knows it." Do you think those destructive voices come from within you? Or is there some malevolent force out there fanning small doubts and insecurities into flames of self-destruction? I call it the Mind War. Satan is out there and he's battling for your mind and denial of his presence is a huge victory in his court.

William Blake, the 18th century poet and artist, captured the sense of the Mind War very well in his poems in *Songs of Experience*. In the poem "London" he writes of a walk through the London streets and in every face he meets, he sees "marks of weakness, marks of woe" He writes "In every cry of every man, in every infant's cry of fear, in every voice, in every ban, The mind-forged manacles I hear." Manacles, shackles, chains that bind forged in the mind. If you want a detailed study of the mind war, I commend to you C.S. Lewis' terrific book *The Screwtape Letters*, which imagines the correspondence between an older demon and the younger demon he is trying to teach.

How does Jesus protect us from this Mind War? Not by making it disappear. So long as we live in a world struggling under sin, Satan will still struggle for our mind. Jesus protects us by reminding us of truth — truth that nothing will shake us from Christ's grip.

The truth that God's love for us does not depend on our performance.

The truth that the Holy Spirit will transform us into something great.

Jesus protects us from the mind war by instilling truth in us, so that we will ultimately not be deceived.

THE SHEPHERD HELPS THE SHEEP FIND PASTURE

Not only do sheep perceive the shepherd's voice, not only are they protected by the shepherd, but also sheep pasture in rich land. Look back at verses 7-10. Jesus identifies himself with the gate — one way in and one way out. What do you get access to through Jesus — pasture, which verse 10 later identifies as life to the full. I love the King James wording of verse 10, which says, "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly." What does it mean to have abundant life? It doesn't necessarily mean having a long physical life span. Rather it means truly living rather than puttering around shuffling your feet in life. It means that you are living your all in the moment because you're experiencing present relationship with Jesus Christ. You're not wistfully longing for shadows from the past nor are you anxiously contemplating a thousand different futures. You're not consumed with "what ifs" and "I wish I had's." Rather you are preoccupied with what Christ is calling you to in this very moment. That is abundant life.

I love the movie *Dead Poet's Society*. Robin Williams plays an English teacher at a boy's boarding school back in the 1950's. He introduces the boys to the British Romantic poets and their mantra *Carpe Diem*. *Carpe Diem* — Latin for "Seize the Day" — wherever you are, seize the moment and live. In the movie, that becomes a call to follow your impulses, and ultimately it leads to disastrous results. However, we as Christians know that we perceive the master's calling, we're protected from the predators, and so we can follow Jesus and go after the great things to which He's called us. I used to have a button that said, "Only by attempting the absurd can we achieve the impossible." That's the kind of life that I'm talking about. Secure in our master's care, following his voice, we are free to seize the day and live our all for Him.

THE SHEPHERD KEEPS THE SHEEP TOGETHER (VS. 14-18)

Not only do sheep perceive the masters voice, receive the master's protection, and find abundant pastureland, but also the sheep of the master are one people. Look at verses 14-16.

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock

and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life — only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father (vs. 14-18).

In the context here, we see Jesus talking to Jews. When he states that he has other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, he announces that inclusion in the family of God will be opened up to people from all other races. That means us, Gentiles, people of European descent, African descent, Asian descent, American descent. When it is all said and done, the Good Shepherd will call out sheep from every nation on earth to worship.

And notice what this unity is based on — Jesus laid down his life voluntarily. No he was not a suicide martyr, shedding his own blood simply to make a statement. Jesus laid down his life so we could be rescued from a very real danger. He is more like the World War II soldier who threw himself on a grenade so his friends in the foxhole could be saved. He, like a good shepherd, died protecting the sheep, and that's what pulls us together and gave us a common identity — the fact that he died for each of us. Because Christ paid this very high price, we are called to unity. We see repeated exhortations to unity in the New Testament — Ephesians 4:3-5 is just an example. We're one together, which means that even when it's hard, we try to extend grace to each other and to look out for one another. There's an African concept called *ubuntu* that means that if one person is not treated right, then all are not treated right. We are one flock. We are one people. We are connected.

So sheep perceive the master's voice and obey, they are protected from the mind wars by the truth told by the master, because of the obedience and protection, they enjoy abundant pasture, and because of the shepherd's ultimate sacrifice, the sheep are one people. This is very good news to those who rightly understand we are living in a world of wolves.