

## The Lord is Our Shepherd

A children's church minister was talking to his audience about the 23rd Psalm. He told the children about sheep, that they weren't smart and needed lots of guidance, and that a shepherd's job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering off and doing dumb things that would get them hurt or killed.

He pointed to the little children in the room and said that they were the sheep and needed lots of guidance.

Then the minister put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows said to the children, "If you are the sheep then who is the shepherd?" He was pretty obviously indicating himself.

A silence of a few seconds followed. Then a young visitor said, "Jesus: Jesus is the shepherd."

The young minister, obviously caught by surprise, said to the young visitor, "Well then, who am I?"

The visitor frowned thoughtfully and then said with a shrug, "I guess you must be a sheep dog."

See – Children get it – sometimes we don't. As David said in his Psalm, The Lord is my Shepherd.

In our society, very few fully understand what it means to be a shepherd. We don't have a lot of people herding sheep from one side of Arizona to the other. Shepherds would literally put their own lives on the line for their flock. That is what Jesus was talking about in the passage Ellie read from earlier – "I am the good shepherd. The Good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Some hired hand doesn't put down his life, they would run away at danger - but the Shepherd would lay down his life for the sheep. This is what Jesus did for us. He laid his life down for us.

A shepherd also takes very good care of his sheep. He leads them to safe places, he keeps them from danger by using his staff, he protects them from enemies. Even in the darkest valleys he is there. And that is where God is for us today. He is always there – reaching out to us. Even in times of illness, disease or death, God is still there.

He Maketh Me Lie Down in Green Pastures – You know, sheep don't lie down easily. They must have 3 requirements met 1) free from all fear 2) No tension between members of the flock 3) free from hunger. Even a jackrabbit coming out of the brush has been known to start a stampede.

Like sheep, we are also easily frightened especially with all of the uncertainties of life, and the world. If we turn on the news for 10 minutes we will easily see several things that can frighten us. But nothing really quiets our souls like knowing that our Shepherd, God, is near.

Sheep also have tension among themselves. I know this sounds strange, but it is called a butting order. They maintain their status by butting and driving away other sheep from their favorite grazing spot. So when there is tension, they can't lie down and rest – they have to be ready to fight and this just wears them out. But whenever the shepherd is around, they forget their rivalries and stop fighting.

Aren't we a little like that? Do we struggle for status in our society? Keeping up with the Joneses? Many of us struggle for self-assertion and self-recognition. We want to be top-sheep. Sometimes we butt heads and argue to compete and get ahead or force our point on someone else. It is almost impossible for us to relax in that kind of environment because we have to always be ready to defend ourselves and our positions. Like sheep, sometimes we have trouble sleeping because of issues like these. But if we can remember to bring God into our lives and have our shepherd there with us, it can help put an end to these types of issues and concerns..

Sheep will not rest until they are free from hunger. A hungry sheep is always on its feet, searching for another mouth of food – trying to satisfy that hunger. God provides us with the spiritual food we need. If we hunger and thirst for him, he has promised to fill us. Through prayer, and getting to know his Word through devotions, attending church and small groups – we can receive that spiritual food and enjoy the green pastures and still waters.

Sheep are interesting creatures. We usually don't consider them the smartest animals around – but they do know their master's voice. A shepherd can put all of his sheep in a pen with another shepherd and not worry about them getting mixed up because the shepherd calls his sheep and they recognize his voice and follow him. The sheep know his voice and the shepherd knows his sheep.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus is speaking to the Jews and saying he has other sheep that do not belong to this fold – referring to the Jews, but I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice and there will be one flock. This second group of sheep is us. This is one of the places where Jesus was talking about the Gentiles (or the non-Jews) and how this message was for them as well.

The Lord desires to be our shepherd. He wants to bless us, and take care of us – put his mark on us – love us. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives – and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. During those hard times, let's not forget the blessings our Shepherd has given us and that he is still right there with us – always.

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This week we had two sermons or meditations.

### Share The Good News

Last week we read in the Book of Acts (Acts of the Apostles) how Peter and John healed a 40 year old man who was lame from birth. Looking back at the story, we remember that he was brought in front of the Beautiful Gate by his friends so he can ask for alms from those entering.

God healed his lameness through the lame man's faith. And the lame man stood up - walked and leaped into the temple and people were amazed because they knew that the man was lame from birth - but yet here he is, walking and leaping!

Peter and John chided the people for looking at them for the miracle and they gave credit to Jesus whom the Jews crucified.

The story goes on a little from there and Peter and John being questioned by the religious authority, the same authority that crucified Jesus, about who's name they did the healing through.

They said through Jesus' name - the one that they crucified. The religious leaders weren't sure what to do. They saw about 5000 who believed this plus the man who was lame from birth was standing right there. So they told Peter and John to go away and not speak about Jesus anymore. But Peter spoke very eloquently and told them pretty much that if God wants them to speak in Jesus' name, why that is exactly what they were going to do.

The religious leaders knew that Peter was a simple fisherman, but he spoke so well and one with authority, they decided it was in their best interest not to hold them.

That was Peter - If you remember, not too long before this time, Peter denied he even knew Jesus - not once, but three times.

Now he is speaking with authority about who Jesus was and is - Peter finally got it and wasn't worried about what happened for proclaiming His name.

Here in America - we don't have to worry. What is the worse that can happen? People call you a bible thumping Holy Roller?

We have it pretty easy here - but it isn't that way everywhere.

Many of us remember what happened just a couple of months ago when the man in Afghanistan was almost put to death because he was a Christian - and not a Muslim. He just had to say, nope, I'm a Muslim - and he would have been let free - but he didn't. He fully accepted Jesus Christ and stood by that.

Well, the religious authorities in Afghanistan just decided that the man was crazy - and he shouldn't be killed. Of course, they say, politics had nothing to do with it.

Did this man know that his life would be spared? Did he know that the United States of America - an entire country - would stand up for him - no - nor did I think he expected it. He was okay with the fact that he would probably die for his faith.

We hear all the time about missionaries in other countries that get put to death for believing and sharing the Word. Peter and John could have been put to death for the way they spoke to the religious authorities.

It makes me wonder, if people are willing to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus - and possibly face death - what makes us shy away from it? I mean - do I dare say the 'E' word - evangelize?

Many say that we are in a "Post Christian" society - Why is that? Why are people avoiding churches? Could it be that so many TV preachers and others keep pushing religion down everyone's throat that people just start rejecting the message without even listening?

There are some common reasons people don't want to be spoken to about religion.

1) Don't see Jesus/God as relevant to their daily lives. - They don't see the Christian message that applies to "real" life - the here and now. Many think that, if there is a God, he is just concerned about my soul - but my soul isn't a problem for me right now - "real problems" are my life right now.

2) Many people see the church as something they don't want to be part of. We have TV evangelists making millions of dollars, while claiming they need more money for Christ - We have sexual misconduct cases by clergy, cults where they kill themselves and the list goes on. Who can say that we blame them?

3) People don't think they can (or want to) fit the "Christian image." Stereotypes include:

Christians always carry around a 10 pound Bible they constantly quote from.

Christians are narrow-minded fanatics.

Christians don't know how or don't like to have fun.

Christians don't know what it is like to have a "real life."

Christians are judgmental.

This is what many people think of when they think of religion. So as Christians, we need to make sure that we try to live as Christ wants us to and not try to be these things. But those who think these things about Christians are ones who would also benefit from a relationship with Christ. They need to know that a relationship with Christ is just that – a relationship that starts today – not just when I die. And what a wonderful relationship it is.

In today's society, we need to have a different approach than just knocking on people's door asking if they have been saved.

There are many ways we can evangelize – without really offending anyone or without worrying about rejection.

One such way is to Try to live our own lives like we think Jesus would want us to - In the New Testament passage Ellie just shared with us, John said that we should show Christ's love not just by word, but by

action. When we see a brother or sister in need – do we refuse to help? By our actions we show what it means to be a Christian.

When we are out in traffic, do we cut others off or do we waive them in front of us? If a stranger asks for help in a grocery store, do we help them or tell them to find someone that works there? How do we live our lives when we aren't in church? Do we show the Christian message in the way we live?

We should also pray- pray that God will touch the lives of those we want to share the message.

Maybe we don't feel comfortable enough with our own faith or we don't feel knowledgeable with what the bible says - I mean, "What if they ask me a question?" "What if I don't know the answer?" "Maybe they will ask a question that will make me question my own faith." Or even worse, "Maybe they just don't care and they will think I am a fanatic." Again, I go back to prayer. We need to pray that when the opportunity presents itself, we will feel Him inside of us and He will help us speak.

When we look at Peter, who was like the "head" Apostle, he denied that he even know Christ - or was one of his followers - 3 times. Imagine - being with Christ for 3 years, watching all of the miracles, and then claiming that you don't even know him.

So how can we be expected to talk about Jesus when Peter didn't?

I'm not standing up here telling you to start knocking on doors – My job is to equip you and prepare you. Pray often, do devotions or read the bible, get a small group together for bible study and put your faith in Him. If you do these things and someone asks you about Christ, you will feel comfortable with answering – or if the opportunity presents itself, you will be ready.

We have a great message called the Good News. It is called the Good News for a reason – If we just heard that there was peace in the Middle East, wouldn't we want to share that? Good news – the message that we should want to share and talk about – Jesus died for us – giving us eternal life - and he accepts each and everyone one of us – we just need to accept him.

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This we remember and reflect on during the Easter Season –we also reflect on the sacrifice our Shepherd made for us – giving us the New Covenant that we receive through Jesus and celebrate every month with Holy Communion.