

Shepherd or shepherder?

John 10:11-18

A church magazine once printed this twist on the 23rd Psalm:

"The TV is my shepherd, I shall not want. It makes me lie down on the sofa. It leads me away from the Faith. It destroys my soul. It leads me in the paths of sex and violence for the sponsor's sake. Yea, though I walk in the shadow of Christian responsibilities, there will be no interruption, for the TV is with me. Its cable and its remote control they comfort me. It prepares a commercial before me in the presence of my worldliness. It anoints my head with ... consumerism, my coveting runneth over. Surely laziness and ignorance shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house watching TV forever."ⁱⁱ It would be funny if it weren't so true.

"The Lord is my shepherd." What do we know about shepherds? Say the word *sheep* and all kinds of images come to mind, entries in the county fair, the proverbial dumb sheep following one after the other over the cliff, insomnia sufferers counting sheep to induce sleep. Say the word shepherd and visions of children dressed in bathrobes and makeshift headpieces for their parts in the church Christmas pageant might come to mind. Or perhaps a favorite painting from church or childhood memory. Sheep we still see in pastures. Shepherds are a rare sight. Sheep can bring to mind a variety of thoughts. Shepherds tend to turn our mind's eye to things ancient and biblical.

The Bible is rich with imagery of sheep and shepherds. From the prophets to the parables of Jesus, the image of a leader of the people as a shepherd of a flock is a familiar one.

We carry on that metaphor when we call our clergy *pastors*. A favorite name for churches in some traditions is The Church of the Good Shepherd, or, in Spanish, *El Buen Pastor*. The word *pastor* comes from a Latin word to pasture or to feed. Remember the risen Christ's words to Peter. "If you love me, feed my sheep."

The shepherd image can be traced back thousands of years. In the ancient world, both Greek and Near Eastern, the image of shepherd and sheep was a frequent one. Kings and gods

were often compared to a good shepherd who cares for his sheepⁱⁱ - or doesn't.

But to know that the comparison wasn't always favorable all you have to do is look at the 34th chapter of Ezekiel:

"Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.

You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

...I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them."

If you saw the recent article about the sheep killed or badly mauled by several dogs, you realize how vulnerable unprotected sheep can be.

And if you pay any attention to news about the country's political leadership, you've seen what happens when leaders fatten their own pockets at the expense of the people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and at risk for lack of food, shelter, and health care.

Ezekiel goes on to speak about God's plans to reverse the exploitation, saying,

"...I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered... I will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses... I will feed them with good pasture...there they shall lie down in good grazing

land...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.ⁱⁱⁱ

But in spite of the promise of Ezekiel or the 23rd Psalm, by the time of Jesus' all shepherds were considered scoundrels, so much so that the phrase "Good Shepherd" had become a sort of oxymoron, a contradiction in terms - so much so that some of his audience would have been puzzled or shocked by Jesus' calling himself a shepherd, just as readers Luke would've been scandalized that the first to know of Jesus' birth were shepherds, who were thought little better than thieves and whose testimony, like that of women, wasn't allowed in court.

Years ago I was an associate pastor in a large church. For a milestone anniversary of the senior pastor's ordained ministry one of the members presented him with a pen and ink drawing that he proudly hung in his office. It was a caricature of him cracking a whip over his sheep. Since he tried to project an image of himself as a humble, caring pastor, it was comforting for me to know that somebody else experienced his leadership as something short of that.

A favorite vacation spot of ours for several years was a small cabin in the national forest in the eastern Sierras between Bridgeport and the remote border of Yosemite that belonged to Denice's great uncle. It was where we went for our honeymoon and for several vacations. Many times driving the winding, dusty gravel road through the meadows and into the Aspens and pines we passed Basque sheepherders, sometimes with dog and donkey and a small trailer, always with at least one or two hundred sheep grazing nearby.

As picturesque and rare as the scene is these days and as good as the Basques are at sheepherding, I once heard a pastor from Nevada once pointed out the contrast between today's sheepherders and the shepherds of the Bible.^{iv}

A sheepherder is somebody who herds sheep, usually in large groups. A shepherd is one who cares for a smaller flock and knows each animal by name. "I know my own and my own know me..." Jesus said. In Hebrew the word for knowing assumes a close personal relationship.

The "Economist and [visionary] E.F. Schumacher [who wrote the classic book, *Small Is Beautiful*] had a ... story about an old shepherd. 'Don't count the sheep,' he said, 'or else they won't thrive.' He meant by this that counting the sheep turned each live, unique animal into an abstraction...each one like the next one. In this way one would begin to lose sight of them as individual sheep. One would fail to notice whether they looked healthy, acted normal, and in general were becoming their best... selves."^v

It's been pointed out that "Counting sheep is something we do when we are seeking to avoid consciousness and sink into sleep. The indistinct nature of fluffy, non-descript, repetitive creatures is supposed to mesmerize our racing brain and soothe it into slumber. Sheepherding requires a completely different association with sheep. The shepherd is alert, responsive, attentive to details in the lives of each individual sheep, watching out for their well-being, and working long hours to ensure that they thrive."^{vi}

There's a story the rabbis tell. A student told his rabbi that he really loved him. The rabbi asked his pupil, "Tell me what causes me pain." But the young man was at a loss for words. His teacher then asked, "How can you love me if you don't know what hurts me?"^{vii}

A few years ago there was an article in the Sunday paper's *Parade* magazine about clergy burnout. The author pointed out that respect for the clergy has diminished partly thanks to the scandals that involved television evangelists. The writer also noted that a significant percentage of pastors grew up in dysfunctional families and entered ordained ministry at least partly to play the role of rescuer.

Now some kinds of rescuing and rescuers we're grateful to have around when there's a need - fire fighters, police, paramedics, the coast guard and mountain rescue teams. But there's an unhealthy kind of rescuing when one person takes on responsibility for another, usually unasked. That kind of rescuing in the end does in both the rescuer and the rescued. A rescuing pastor finally burns out and can't be depended to be there when he or she's really needed. And the ones rescued may never learn to take responsibility for their own lives.

True pastoral care includes a prophetic word of challenge - calling people to be the people God

made us to be, and it enlists the ministry of others - the priesthood of all believers, the pastoral care that every Christian is called to give.

Some shepherds and some leaders exploit their leadership. Some run when the going is rough. Some stay.

So how can one tell the good shepherd from the hireling before it's too late?

When Samuel went at God's bidding to anoint one of Jesse's sons as king of Israel, "he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the LORD's anointed is now before Yahweh, the Lord.' But Yahweh said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for I do not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but I look on the heart.'^{viii}

After Jesse had presented seven of his sons to Samuel, "Samuel said to Jesse, 'The LORD has not chosen any of these...' 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.'^{ix}

David the shepherd was an unlikely choice for a king. He turned out to be Israel's greatest and most popular leader, the one whose shoes only the Messiah could fill. Maybe he brought something of his care for his sheep to his care for his people. In spite of his tragic flaws, he never forgot his roots and led his people with compassion.

When the prophet Nathan asked for David's judgment on a rich man who took the one ewe lamb of a poor man for himself, David without hesitation condemned the rich man, not realizing that Nathan was using a metaphor about David's taking of the beautiful Bathsheba from the clueless Uriah the Hittite. How many leaders can you imagine doing what David did - admitting their crime and praying on their knees for forgiveness?

Even some who are caught red-handed can't seem to bring themselves to own up to their failing by saying "I made a mistake." Instead they use that classic phrase I use to illustrate passive voice in my English classes. They say, "Mistakes were made," carefully avoiding responsibility and implying the blame might belong to someone else.

Had it been left to a search committee's recommendation and a popular vote the shepherd boy David never would have gotten to be king. Even if it had been left up to Samuel, he would

have picked the oldest and tallest of Jesse's sons, the one who looked like good king material. But Samuel didn't follow his own prejudices. He listened to God.

"...A famous dramatist...visited his home town... In the little church there on Sunday morning he was asked to recite some passage of literature. He chose the 23rd psalm,...declaring it the greatest thing ever written.

"...He put his soul into his [reading.] As he finished, the people were hushed, awed. The devout country pastor was hesitant as to what to do next; and so he decided to speak in an expository manner on that psalm.

"Sincerely and earnestly, he told very simply something of what the Shepherd meant to him, about the beauty of green pastures, the peace of still waters, the hope of dwelling in the sheepfold of the Lord...

...[Afterward, when he] was about to pronounce the benediction, ...the distinguished visitor arose and asked to say a word. He said, 'You know that I know the shepherd psalm, and can recite it quite well. But this man,' and he gestured toward the pastor, 'this man -- he knows the Shepherd.'^x

The good shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. He brings the whole flock together under his care.^{xi}

Unlike the bad shepherds who exploit the sheep, and unlike the hired hand, who runs away at the first sign of danger, Jesus the Good Shepherd will risk his life for his sheep.

In the beginning of the church when the Christian community was under constant threat, both from Christians in name only who twisted the truth to suit their own needs, and from government officials who persecuted it, the Good Shepherd stood as a symbol and model for pastors. In spite of the dangers, pastors were called on to care for those whose lives were in their care. There probably have always been some for whom pastoring was a job - work they did for someone else. When the going gets rough, they quickly hand in their resignations. But throughout the history of the church there have been others who remained faithful shepherds, like Jesus, paying for their love with their lives, sometimes sacrificing themselves for their people, sometimes dying with them.

At the point of a Roman sword, under the heel of an SS boot, in front of a death squad in El Salvador, in a "mental hospital" in the Soviet Union, with a burning cross on the front lawn, or telephoned threats in the middle of the night, or a punishing pay cut, they stayed with their flock rather than abandon them.^{xii}

It wasn't unheard of in the ancient world for a shepherd to *risk* his life for his flock.^{xiii} The hunting lion or the marauding wolf pack might kill a shepherd who stood between them and their prey. But a shepherd who willingly sacrificed himself to save his flock was something else. That's what Jesus did - out of love for his sheep, as stupid, as small-minded, as mindless, as cowardly as we are. To save us, he became as vulnerable as we are.

One Easter about twenty years ago, there was a television miniseries called "A.D." On the final night we watched in shocked disbelief as the Romans took the children of Christian parents to the Coliseum where they pretended to play a game as they dressed the children in sheepskins and coaxed them to act like lambs. As a special entertainment treat for the perverted taste of the emperor Nero, the announcer explained that the children would act out the parable of the Good Shepherd from their Scriptures. As two or three youths, playing the shepherd part, tried helplessly to protect the children, attack dogs were released into the arena. In true Hollywood style two of the lead characters, an unlikely pair of gladiators, Caleb, a Jewish Zealot from Jerusalem, and the daughter of a Roman patrician, saved the day by killing the dogs, rescuing most of the children with the aid of other gladiators, and, of course, winning the crowd's approval. But then Valerius, an officer in the Praetorian guard, ran into the arena searching for his daughter among the dead children. He walked out of the arena with a lifeless body in his arms, weeping. Then a soldier appeared with his daughter, alive. He cried tears of joy. But then he mourned for the mother and father of the girl whose body he held, and there he renounced Rome and its decadent savagery.^{xiv}

Where was the Good Shepherd? Not in the powerful bodies of the spear and sword-wielding gladiators but in the lifeless body of that girl, wearing a lambskin and killed by the powers of darkness. There, dying the death of his beloved sheep again and again. And there, rising to life, again and again and again. The Good Shepherd is also the sacrificial lamb, and it was John of

Patmos' vision of the bloody but triumphant Lamb of God that gave hope and courage – even the courage to die - to the persecuted readers of Revelation.

You see, the Resurrection isn't about life after death so much as it's about the life that will not be, cannot be, intimidated or destroyed by the power or fear of death in the here and now. It's about life in spite of, in the face of death. It *is* about God having the last word in the end, but it's also about doing the right thing in the here and now. And the Good Shepherd, willing to lay down his life for his sheep is a role model for every one of us as we, too, serve his sheep.

ⁱ *Anglican Digest* July 1984.

ⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary*, Year B, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, 189.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ezekiel 34: 2-16

^{iv} Bill Birdsey, at a California-Nevada Annual Conference Small Church gathering at Valley of the Moon UMC, Sonoma ca 1980.

^v Story told by John Holt, in *Homiletics*, 3:2 April-June 1991, 12.

^{vi} Leonard I. Sweet and K. Elizabeth Rennie, *Homiletics*, 3:2 April-June 1991, 12.

^{vii} Source unknown

^{viii} 1 Samuel 16: 6b-7.

^{ix} 1 Samuel 16:11, adapted.

^x Leonard W. Mann, *Emphasis*, 20:11, April 1991, 18.

^{xi} John K. Berland, "An Empty Tomb, A Risen Lord," (Sermon Starters), *The Circuit Rider*, March 1985, 19.

^{xii} Fred Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary*, Lent, Holy Week, Easter Year B, 189.

^{xiii} George W. MacRae, *Proclamation 2*, Series B, 34.

^{xiv} NBC Television, April 4, 1985.