

The Good Shepherd” May 8, 2022

(sermon theme: Garth Wehfritz-Hanson)

Central United Church, Windsor

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Scripture: John 10: 1-16, Psalms 23

Reflection: There are many metaphors for God scattered throughout our Bible. It’s fascinating to explore the nature of God, where we experience God through many textures and titles which make God identifiable to us. Our psalm and gospel for today all employ the metaphor of God as Shepherd and people as sheep.

Most of us find comfort in the metaphor of God as Shepherd. However, when it comes to the metaphor of people like sheep; a lot of us protest and become rather indignant—we’re not dumb and blind like sheep, are we? We don’t easily fall astray or get lost very easily, do we?

No one is able to fool, trick or deceive us by “pulling the wool over our eyes,” are they? I know in the world of social media today I hear the word sheep used to describe people all the time. Those who subscribe to world views, politics, religions that are different are labelled sheep all the time.

In our psalm, second lesson and gospel, the sheep are pictured as following the shepherd, recognizing and listening to the shepherd’s voice. But I wonder, do we as sheep of Christ our Good Shepherd always follow him? Do we as sheep of Christ’s flock always recognize and listen to his voice?

There was a CBC game that ran from 1957- to 1995 called Front Page Challenge. Do you guys remember it? It was a Canadian panel game about current events and history. The program frequently had hidden familiar guests and attempted to disguise their voices. On a number of occasions, the panel members failed to identify the hidden guest’s voice—while on other occasions, they are successful in recognizing the voice.

Most of us have also had similar experiences when answering the telephone. Sometimes we receive a call from someone whom we know but maybe

haven't talked with or seen for a long time. Sometimes we might recognize their voice, while at other times, we might not.

Another experience described in our text today that some of us may be able to identify with is getting lost as a child or losing a child in a crowded public place. That's got to be one of the most terrifying experiences in the world. In a panic, the parents will yell out the child's name or the child will yell out for their parents.

One of the most joyful scenes one could ever witness is the reunion of parents and their children when they hear each other's voices and are led out of their lostness by finding one another.

Jesus says: "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." These are very comforting words to us all; some of the most comforting we're ever likely to hear. Yet, I wonder: do we as Christ's sheep really listen to; really hear Christ's voice? Do we really follow Christ?

There are so many voices speaking to us in our world today. The mass media, especially through advertising, speaks with a very influential, manipulative, seductive voice. So many people in our society literally "buy into" this voice of the mass media advertising industry. It preaches a message of endless greed and consumerism.

It tells us: "You must have this, that, or the other thing. You can have anything you want. Satisfy your every want, you deserve it, you can have it all." This message is not the voice of Christ. It stops at nothing to exploit people and all of the world's resources. That message is more destructive than good, it is making the poor poorer, the rich richer and by polluting our environment and depleting all of the earth's resources.

It is also a lie because it would lead people to believe that our ultimate needs can be met by buying and possessing consumer goods. I say today that our ultimate needs can only be met by being in loving relationships with God and one another.

Robert Wozniak is an author and professor of homiletics at the Washington Theological Union, and he wrote: “We now have a two-class society, the information-rich and the information poor”. In such a world information is power. But the irony of our age is that the very information technology that was supposed to liberate us has begun to control us in so many ways.

In a world with so much available information, it can be tricky to know just what information is central to our lives. In a world with so many voices over so many cables and computers, sometimes it is hard to discern exactly which voices we should be listening to.

There are indeed many fraudulent voices; many voices online and even on the telephone, radio and television trying to “pull the wool over our eyes.” Sometimes it’s the voices of friends and family who are providing wrong information which point us in the wrong direction.

Do we listen to them or do we recognize them for what they really are—as false voices leading us away from truth and justice, which is the voice of our Good Shepherd? We really have to be very discerning of the voices we listen to, don’t we? Sometimes the voices we listen to are the voices of the horoscope columnist or the voices of psychics.

If we pay more heed to all of the other competing voices, then the voice of Christ becomes more difficult to hear and discern. Whose voice are you listening to today? Whose voices are you trusting and following? Are trusting the voice of the good shepherd who loves and cares for you, the shepherd who leads you into green pastures? Or are you listening other voices? And where are the other voices leading you? Verses 11-13 of our text describes the results of following the shepherd and the results of following anyone else...

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own 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.

Today the psalmist reminds us that the voice of our Good Shepherd is the one who protects us, waters and feeds us and cares for all of our needs. He is the one, who, in our second lesson is not only the Lamb who sacrificed to show us the way to love, but also the Shepherd who promises us that one day: we will hunger and thirst no more; sun and scorching heat will not strike us; he will guide us to springs of living water and wipe away every tear.

What a marvellous promise that is! He is the one who, in our gospel reassures us: he knows us and we know shall never perish or be snatched away from him. If we listen to his voice, he shall always be with us and we with him. Do you believe the promises of all the other voices in our world or the promises of God's word? Are you listening to the voices of so many in our world today or are you listening to our Good Shepherd's voice?

May God grant us the grace and discernment necessary not to be led astray by all of the competing, false voices in our world today; by recognizing, listening to and following the true voice of our Good Shepherd. It's only then we are able to experience the benefits of being in relationship with the Shepherd of Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, and he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen, and Amen...

Prayer:

Our Shepherding God! O Lord, our Shepherding God, come close to us now. Come near us in our time of need. Shepherding God, we need you in our

time of anxiety. We need you in our time of economic uncertainty. We need you in a time of a globe-trotting disease. We need you to bind our wounds and pour your healing ointment on our heads.

We need the briars, brambles, and burrs pulled out of our fleece and skin. Shepherding God. You guide us with your voice, Help us to listen and follow no matter where your voice leads. Help us to trust you.

Shepherding God, protect us from the hired hands that do not really care for us and have neglected or abused us in the past. We pray for the safety of our shut-ins... we pray for those in our hearts and minds..

Lord, we pray for those who don't know the shepherd, whose life circumstances kept them from knowing the good shepherd. We pray that by our actions, our behaviour, and our reaching out into the community, they may come to know you.

Shepherding God, renew us, guide us with your love and renew us with your peace. Amen