

OPENING SENTENCE:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psalm 23:1,6

PRAYER of ADORATION:

Our God is an awesome God. He is kind, tenderhearted, and merciful. Our Father loves us with an everlasting love, and He is always concerned about our welfare. All that we need, He provides through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. God should always be revered and adored. He should have our utmost respect. Let us lift up our praises to the One who is the living God, our God who is our Father. AMEN.

Sermon: Like a Shepherd Lead Us

Scripture: John 10:1-10

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again, Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

There is no better-loved picture of Jesus than the good shepherd. The picture of the shepherd is woven into the language and imagery of the Bible. It could not be otherwise. The main part of Judea was a central plateau, stretching from Bethel to Hebron for a distance of about thirty-five miles and varying from fourteen to seventeen miles across. The ground, for the most part, was rough and stony. Judea was much more a pastoral than an agricultural country, and it was, therefore, inevitable that the most familiar figure of the Judean uplands was the shepherd.

His life was very hard. No flock ever grazed without a shepherd, and he was never off duty. There being little grass, the sheep were bound to wander; and since there were no protecting walls, the sheep had to constantly be watched. On either side of the narrow plateau, the ground dipped sharply down to craggy deserts, and the sheep were always liable to stray away and get lost.

The shepherd's task was not only constant but also dangerous, for, in addition, he had to guard the flock against wild animals, especially against wolves, and there were always thieves and robbers ready to steal the sheep. George Adam Smith, an Old Testament scholar who traveled often in Palestine, writes; “On some high moor across which at night the hyaenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, armed, leaning on his staff and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judea sprang to the front in his people's history; why they gave his name to the king and made him the symbol of providence; why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice.” Constant vigilance, fearless courage and patient love for his flock were the necessary characteristics of the shepherd.

In the Old Testament, God is often pictured as the shepherd, and the people of his flock. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1). “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Psalm 77:20). “We your people, the flock of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever” (Psalm 79:13).

“Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock” (Psalm 80:1). “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” (Psalm 95:7). “We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Psalm 100:3). God’s Anointed One, the Messiah, is also pictured as the shepherd of the sheep. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (Isaiah 40:11). “He will be shepherding the flock of the Lord faithfully and righteously and will suffer none of them to stumble in their pasture. He will lead them all alright” (Psalms of Solomon 17:40-41). The leaders of the people are described as the shepherds of God’s people and nation. “Woe to the shepherd who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” (Jeremiah 23:1). Ezekiel has a tremendous indictment of the false leaders who seek their own good rather than the good of the flock. “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?” (Ezekiel 34:2).

This picture passes over into the New Testament. Jesus is the good shepherd. He is the shepherd who will risk his life to seek and to save the one straying sheep (Matthew 18:12; Luke 15:4). He has pity upon the people because they are as sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36; Mark 6:34). His disciples are his little flock (Luke 12:32) When he, the shepherd, is smitten, the sheep are scattered (Mark 14:27; Matthew 26:31). He is the shepherd of human souls (I Peter 2:25), and the great shepherd of the sheep (Hebrews 13:20). Just as in the Old Testament picture, the leaders of the Church are the shepherds and the people are the flock. It is the duty of the leader to feed the flock of God, to accept the oversight willingly and not by constraint, to do it eagerly and not for love of money, not to use the position for the exercise of power and to be an example to the flock (I Peter 5:2-3). Paul urges the elders of Ephesus to take heed to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers (Acts 20:28). It is Jesus’ last command to Peter that he should feed his lambs and his sheep (John 21:15-19). The very word “Pastor” (Ephesians 4:11) is the Latin word for shepherd.

The Jews had a lovely legend to explain why God chose Moses to be the leader of his people. “When Moses was feeding his father-in-law’s flock in the wilderness, a young kid ran away. Moses followed it until it reached a ravine, where it found a well to drink from. When Moses got up to it he said; ‘I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be weary.’ He took the kid on his shoulders and carried it back. Then God said; ‘because you have shone pity in leading back one of a flock belonging to a man, you shall lead “My” flock Israel.’”

The word “Shepherd” should paint a picture to us of the unceasing vigilance and patience of the love of God; and it should remind us of our duty towards one another, especially if we hold any kind of office in the Church of Christ.

At the end of the day, when the sheep were going into the fold, the shepherd held his rod across the entrance, quite close to the ground; and every sheep had to pass under it, and, as each sheep passed under, the shepherd quickly examined it to see if it had received any kind of injury during the day. (Sort of like when we pray at night before bed.)

In Palestine, the shepherd went in front and the sheep followed. The shepherd went first to see that the path was safe, and sometimes the sheep had to be encouraged to follow. A traveler tells how he saw a shepherd leading his flock come to a ford across a stream. The sheep were unwilling to cross. The shepherd finally solved the problem by carrying one of the lambs across. When its mother saw her lamb on the other side she crossed too, and soon all the rest of the flock had followed her.

In Palestine the sheep are often with the shepherd for years, and often they have names by which the shepherd calls them. Usually these names are descriptive, for instance, “Brown leg or Black ear”. It is strictly true that in this part of the world the sheep know and understand the shepherd’s voice, and that they will never answer to the voice of a stranger. H.V. Morton tells of a scene that he saw in a cave near Bethlehem. Two shepherds had sheltered their flocks in the cave during the night. How were the flocks to be sorted out?

One of the shepherds stood some distance away and gave his peculiar call which only his own sheep knew, and soon his whole flock had run to him, because they knew his voice. They would have come for no one else, but they knew the call of their own shepherd. Every detail of the shepherd's life lights up the picture of the good shepherd whose sheep hear his voice and whose constant care is for his flock.

The Jews did not understand the meaning of the story of the good shepherd. So Jesus, plainly and without concealment, applied it to himself. He began by saying; "I am the door." In this parable, Jesus spoke about two kinds of sheepfolds. In villages and towns, themselves, there were communal sheepfolds where all the village flocks were sheltered when they returned home at night. These folds were protected by rock walls and a strong door of which only the guardian of the door held the key. It was to that kind of fold Jesus referred in verses 2 and 3, but when the sheep were out on the hills in the warm season and did not return at night to the village at all, they were collected into sheepfolds on the hillside. These hillside sheepfolds were just open spaces enclosed by a wall.

In them, there was an opening by which the sheep came in and went out; but there was no door of any kind. What happened was that at night the shepherd himself lay down across the opening, and no sheep could get out or in except over his body. In the most literal sense, the shepherd was the door. That is what Jesus was thinking of when he said: "I am the door". Through him and through him alone, we find access to God.

"Through him" said Paul, we "Have access to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). Jesus opens the way to God. Until Jesus came, people could think of God only as, at best, a stranger and as, at worst, an enemy. But Jesus came to show the people what God is like, and to open the way to him. He is the door through whom alone entrance to God becomes possible.

To describe something of what that entrance to God means, Jesus uses a well-known Hebrew phrase, He says that through him we can go in and come out. To be able to go in and come out unmolested was the Jewish way of describing a life that is absolutely secure and safe. When people can go in and out without fear, it means that their country is at peace, that the forces of law and order are supreme, and that they enjoy perfect security.

The leader of the nation is to be one who can bring them out and lead them in (Numbers 27:17). The person who is obedient to God is said to be blessed when he come in and blessed when going out (Deuteronomy 28:6). Once anyone discovers, through Jesus Christ, what God is like, a new sense of safety and security enters into life. If life is known to be in the hands of a God like that, the worries and the fears are gone. Jesus said that those who came before him were thieves and robbers. He was of course not referring to the great succession of the prophets and the heroes, but to those adventurers who were continually arising in Palestine and promising that, if people would follow them, they would bring in the Golden Age. All these claimants were insurrectionist. They believed that people would have to wade through blood to the Golden Age. Jesus is saying, "There have been men who claim that they were leaders sent to you from God. They believed in war, murder, assassination. Their way only leads forever further and further away from God. My way is the way of peace and love and life; and if you will only take it, it leads ever closer and closer to God."

There have been, and still are, those who believe that the Golden Age must be brought in with violence, class warfare, bitterness and destruction. It is the message of Jesus that the only way that leads to God in heaven and to the Golden Age on earth is the way of love.

Jesus claims that he came that men and women might have life and might have it more abundantly. To be a follower of Jesus, to know who he is and what he means, is to have a superabundance of life. When we try to live our own lives, life is a dull, dispirited thing. When we walk with Jesus, there comes a new vitality, a superabundance of life. It is only when we live with Christ that life becomes really worth living and we begin to live in the real sense of the word.

CLOSING PRAYER: Almighty God, you sent Jesus, our good shepherd, to gather us together. May we not wander from his flock, but follow wherever he leads us, listening for his voice and staying near him, until we are safely in your fold, to live with you forever; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

The image of the “gate” by which the sheep can go to “Find pasture” is used to express Jesus’ role of bringing God’s saving love to the world. While the thief comes to “steal and kill and destroy”, Jesus comes “That they may have life, and have it abundantly.” “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. NOW GO IN PEACE!