

SERMON TITLE- "The Good Shepherd"

TEXT- John 10:1-18

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Last week we looked at a picture that Isaiah used to illustrate both the character of God and the character of humanity. It was the picture of God as shepherd and humanity as sheep.

The picture highlights a number of key points-

God- 1. Loves us

2. Is above us

People- 1. Can't survive without help

2. Need "sheep herding"

Isaiah was not the writer who introduced this image and was not even the OT writer who used it the most- but it was important to his message.

In the NT, Jesus took the image of shepherd and sheep and used it as one of His major Kingdom teaching points. Today we are going to shift to the further teaching that Jesus highlighted from the Shepherd image. Jesus takes the lessons from Isaiah and the OT and moves to some other Kingdom conclusions that follow from them. These conclusions also follow from the fact that He is the promised Messiah that the prophets foretold.

It began early in Jesus' ministry as He started interacting with the people on the land. What Jesus found was a desperate hunger among the people as they followed Him around.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36

And Jesus knew His mission- a mission that had been defined from birth and foretold by the prophets-

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel. Matthew 2:6

Jesus knew that He was that Shepherd and that the people He encountered were the sheep.

And so it was that Jesus defined His mission around this picture. The most elaborate description of this is in John 10 where Jesus does a detailed elaboration of the Shepherd/Sheep metaphor. When Jesus does so in this text the picture is given with in a different order because it comes as part of a larger discussion but the message is this- twice He says-

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . .

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me . . . John 10:11 & 14

Bottom line- Jesus explicitly claims to be "The Good Shepherd."

Jesus Is The Good Shepherd

There are more parts embedded in this claim [some but not all of which we will look at today] but Jesus makes it as plain as can be- He is the One. He is the One, the

Messiah that the prophets have talked about since the beginning- even at the very beginning in the Garden of Eden when God promised that a Saviour would come and crush the head to the serpent.

As THE shepherd, Jesus promises that He is that missing piece that we humans need. His mission in the days and years ahead would be to explain what this means and how we as people can accept God's offer of Good News.

So with that we go back to the beginning of this particular explanation. Jesus starts off the section with a startling challenge- that relates back to the conversation He had been having with and about the Pharisees and their leadership of God's people. It is blunt.

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. John 10:1

#1. There Is A Sheep Pen

In adding the idea of the sheep pen, Jesus is adding something to the metaphor of the OT and Psalm 23. Of course it follows nicely from the metaphor that Isaiah and the prophets have given us but not everything that we can draw from any given metaphor necessarily is part of it. In this case, Jesus makes the image of the sheep pen and integral part of it.

Why does it follow so well? If sheep are animals that are easily at the mercy of predators- then they will need protection. And protection from predators is exactly why the sheep pens were built. Sheep stick together and sheep have ample protection from the weather that pens are not needed for those reasons. But sheep are easy targets for predators. The sheep pen keeps them away.

This is an image that those who herd animals in wild areas easily understand. To this day herding people around the world build pens where they put their animals for the night. In countries like Africa, where there are thorn trees, the pens are made of thorn branches to keep the predators out.

The problem of predators is a big part of this metaphor even as relates to the shepherd. Jesus for example makes a distinction between the true shepherd and a hired shepherd-

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. John 10:12-13

For now we are focusing on the sheep pen as protection for the sheep- but as Jesus points out the matter of the predator is very much part of this imagery.

The sheep pen is a new idea [as far as I can tell] that Jesus adds to the OT picture of the Shepherd and sheep. Why is this needed for the picture of the Kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurates?

Let me suggest it is because unlike the people of God in the OT, who lived in a country that was supposed to be governed by God, the people of God in the NT live in the wilds. There was no need for a sheep pen in the OT paradigm because the land was God's land. In picture of the KoG that Jesus talks about- God's people live among the predators. They need a sheep pen for protection because the land they live in is not God's land in the sense of practical ruler-ship. God's people live in a "land" whose "prince" is

hostile to God.

And what is the sheep pen? I believe that the NT shows that it is the church.

For the sheep to survive- they need to come into that place for rest and safety.

To extend that metaphor a little bit [and appropriately] it also means that the sheep do not actually spend their whole time in the sheep pen, they go out during the day to eat etc, and they go into the sheep pen for the night.

I think that this makes a great deal of sense when we think about the church. Some of us have to stay in the church to look after things- but working in the church is not what it is all about- it is only part of the assignment of being Kingdom people.

So, there is a sheep pen that is to be the place of protection, safety and rest, for the people of the Kingdom.

But we don't just stay in the church. We go out to work.

I think it helps us understand what one of the purposes of the church is- a place of protection, safety and rest for the people of the Kingdom.

Also-

#2. There Are Other Shepherds- Evil Shepherds

In the verses we looked at earlier [the wolves] Jesus mentioned the hired hand. Presumably the hired hand is not a bad person- he is simply hired and can't be expected to care for the sheep the way the owner does. But that is not the only kind of other shepherd.

There are also evil or false shepherds.

Just to be very clear- the shepherd is a metaphor for leadership.

What Jesus builds on from the metaphor of the Shepherd and the sheep is the need that we human beings have for shepherds. As humans we are herd animals in a deep way. We crave strong leadership- and God offers strong leadership.

But the craving for leadership, in itself, does not discriminate between good leaders and evil leaders. When a dynamic person comes along- who manages to hit the right "leadership" nerves in our beings- we are inclined to follow.

On Tuesday night I watched a PBS special called the Clinton 12. It was the story of the 12 black children who went to the first desegregated school in Tennessee, in 1956.

It is a moving story of a time of transition in racial law in the US and it shows the best and worst of how we behave as human beings. In this context, however, it shows how people who were otherwise unsure of their position on the matter of desegregation where moved to become a mob by a couple of charismatic leaders called, John Kasper and "Forrest" Carter.

During a time of uncertainty they put words and ideas into people's brains and then convinced these people to follow them. They turned a complex transition that the US south was going through into chaos. They incited otherwise law-abiding people to become mobs.

This is an example of something that happens over and over again in the course of history and the worst and most dramatic examples are those of the Hitlers of the world.

Somehow leaders like this persuade people to do terrible things that we can't imagine doing when we sit and talk to each other in "normal" circumstances.

But the stories of Hitler actually mask how susceptible we are to leaders/shepherds that push the right buttons. When I watched the special about the

Clinton 12 or if I should watch a movie about the genocide of WW2, I am so easily mortified that people would behave in such terrible ways. "How could anyone possibly think such behaviour is justifiable?" is the message of these films.

In the sense that they are trying to teach us not to follow such terrible examples, they are doing a good thing. What they miss- probably because it is too disturbing- is how easily we fall under the spell of leaders, like those we vilify. In reality the people doing all the terrible things- that rightly horrify us- are people just like us. In reality, history tells us- you and I would be doing all those terrible things.

And why? because when a leader comes along who hits all the right notes- we tend to follow the herd.

We need a Good Shepherd and we need to be very aware that not every shepherd is good.

One of the important applications of this image is that we need to be very aware that there are evil shepherds and we need to discriminate.

We follow the Good Shepherd because we don't know the right way to go but if we don't know the right way to go then we are easy targets for those who would mislead us.

When we talk about Hitler or racism it is easy for us to identify things that represent evil- but what does being lead down a dangerous road mean for God's people?

The answer is- away from the relationship with God that actually fills the need we were designed with. Next week Ryan will take us back to a theme that Isaiah did deal with a great deal- the matter of idols.

For now however we will just leave it with the observation that there are "shepherds" whose mission it is to draw us to other gods.

These gods are far more subtle than joining in genocide or other form of racism. These gods are part of the daily routines of life that you and I live and breath in. They are the gods that are part of our families, of our work and of our entertainment. They are the gods that shift us away from the orientation that the true God built into our beings.

The Good Shepherd, of course, directs us to a relationship with the true God. And of course that was what Jesus talked about throughout His ministry.

In this section, however, Jesus focuses on a different aspect of the evil shepherd. So what makes for a Good Shepherd, then?

Jesus answers that question-

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. John 10:2-3

3The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." John 10:3-5

Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. John 10:6

Notice how John explains that Jesus is using a "figure of speech." A lot of arguments about the Scriptures revolve around what the Bible means and what parts are "literal" or figurative. In most cases we don't have a nice explanation like this but in fact the lines are seldom as simple as we would like. The truths of God are expressed in words

and that itself always means interpretation. The fact that this is a figure of speech does not mean that it is of a lower level of significance.

But what is the mark of the true shepherd?

#3. The True Shepherds Enter By The True Gate

And conversely false shepherds enter by another route.

There are of course many kinds of shepherds/leaders in all kinds of different contexts. And we need them in every context. Currently we are building our church. To do this will we have a couple of “shepherds” herding us through this process.

One of those shepherds is our project manager, Bob Colclough. His job is to herd us through the process of the city and its permits and regulations. Our other shepherds are the Dueck Const brothers. Their job is to direct us through the practical questions of building.

How do we know if they are good shepherds? We ask ourselves 2 questions. First, have they done this before? Secondly, do they know their purpose? We have a great team because in both questions the answer is very clear- the answers are a clear, “yes!”

When it come to the matter of the Good Shepherd, His mission is clear. He has come to direct us to a good relationship to God. That is His purpose and hence that is the gate that He enters through.

In 2 weeks, I hope to take another look at this gate because Jesus talks about the gate specifically when He says-

I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. John 10:7

This is another layer of the metaphor that you will come across if you read this full passage and we will talk further about this- but for now, we will focus on the mission of the shepherd as the gate

Jesus has come to

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 . . . John 10:14-15

So what are some other gates through which shepherds can enter? I think there are an almost infinite number of other gates. I will list 4 that are as ancient as the church itself.

#1. The gate of finances

This is a huge gate that false shepherds have used to gain access to the church. We all need help with money because we are all inclined to spend more than we earn.

Shepherds who claim to have special insights to help us get more money [generally not who teach is to spend less] will always find an audience.

#2. The gate of health

This is another massive gate and those who struggle with health battles are extremely susceptible to a shepherd who rolls into town and claims that they have the answer to health problems. Those who claim to be healer will always gather a crowd.

#3. The gate of frustrated relationships and personalities

This is a gate that is a little subtler, but not really new. Just go to Chapters and you will stacks of books claiming to have insights into our characters and how these can be fixed. Just as health and financial expertise is very legitimate- this too is not the gate that a shepherd of God’s flock should use to gain entry into leadership.

#4. The gate of entertainment

Entertainment has been around from the beginning of time and it is good. God's people have enjoyed their writers, musicians, dancers, actors and orators. These gifts are celebrated and like all of the above have their place in the household of God. But the gate of entertainment- especially the gates of music, writing and oratory- are NOT legitimate entry levels to the leadership of God's people.

There is only one gate- the mission to lead God's people to know Him. That was Jesus' mission and that is the mission of true shepherds of God's people.

Each in their own way- these are all good gates just as the gate of finding good shepherds to direct our building project is a good gate. But the danger comes when the shepherd who enters from another gate- by virtue of their prowess in that other field- becomes a shepherd in the matter of the relationship with God.

Good shepherds, who are honest in those other fields, will know that this does not make them a shepherd in the matter of knowing God and will refuse to be seen as shepherds in that matter.

But false shepherds, those shepherds with evil motives, and those shepherds who just love the idea of shepherding- will use the other gates to gain entry to the flock- and from the place of leadership that they acquire- will lead the flock to danger.

Jesus came to earth as the Good Shepherd. He came to lead us, His people, both individually and collectively to the place of the relationship with God that He intended from the very beginning- from the moment that He breathed life into us. A tiny picture of that relationship was captured in the moment when God came to walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening. It is a relationship that is frustrated.

There are all kinds of diversions away from this purpose and all kinds of "shepherds" only too willing to take us to various other places. We are warned about them in Jesus application of this metaphor.

As well, we are reminded that there is a "sheep pen" which is a place of safety for God's sheep.

The Rest of the Text

7Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:7-10

11"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The 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. 13The

man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. John 10:11-13

14"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I 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. John 10:14-16

17The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.
18No 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." John 10:17-18