

Sheep And The Good Shepherd

Jeremiah 23:1-6

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the LORD. “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD. “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: the Lord is our righteousness.

John 10:1-15

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice. “Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. “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. “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—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

MESSAGE:

Sheep are cute and cuddly. They say baaa which we find pleasant. They’re useful: they make wool to keep us warm. They’re also tasty when they’re young, but we won’t go into that. All in all sheep are nice creatures so we don’t mind it when God calls us his sheep. But why *does* he call us sheep? Why not lions or tigers or bears? Lions and

tigers and bears are more imposing than sheep. But the Lord calls us sheep and taught us to pray, “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...” Recently I was going over that Psalm in my mind and I started wondering: what exactly is there about us that resembles sheep? I have no firsthand knowledge about them: I’ve never lived on a farm, and the community I live in now explicitly forbids owning livestock. One poor lady in our neighborhood has been keeping a few pet chickens in a coop in her back yard and twice the board of trustees has tried to make her get rid of them. So far the good-hearted residents have voted to let her keep them. I can’t wait until someone buys a sheep and lets it graze in his front yard. Anyway, since I decided to do a little research on them and here’s what I found.

First and foremost, sheep are dumb--and I mean dumb as in “stupid.” The following is an actual news story: “hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff in eastern Turkey, plunging to their deaths while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 meters to their deaths in a ravine in Van Province near Iran. They broke the fall of another 1100 sheep who survived. Shepherds from a nearby village had neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free. The loss to local farmers was estimated at \$74,000.” One sheep wandered off a cliff and 1499 others followed it. Can you picture 1500 sheep walking off a cliff, one after the other? The ones at the bottom were crushed to death by the ones on top of them and the ones on top were lying on a big downy-soft pillow. Sheep obviously don’t make intelligent decisions for themselves which is why they need a shepherd to take care of them.

The second thing I learned about sheep is that they are directionless: they have no idea where they are or where they’re going at any given point in time. What makes it worse is that they are prone to wander off by themselves.

Even if you put them in a perfect environment with everything they need—green pastures and still waters—if a shepherd doesn’t keep them under surveillance they will wander off and get lost. And once they are lost they have no idea how to get back to the flock so they simply lie down and refuse to budge. (I suppose that’s why in Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep the shepherd has to carry the lost sheep back to the flock.)

The third thing I learned is that sheep are utterly defenseless. Left to themselves they won’t last long because they are a perfect target for predators. Even when they do sense danger, they haven’t a clue as to what to do. Other animals have ways of reacting when they feel threatened. Some fight, some take flight, and some put up a bluff. A sheep does none of these. If he sees a bear or wolf coming, he doesn’t have claws or fangs or venom or spines or quills or talons, so fighting is out of the question. How about trying to run away or take flight? Unfortunately, sheep aren’t fast and they don’t have wings. How about trying to put up a bluff? A dog will growl and show his teeth. A lion will roar. A rattlesnake will shake his rattle. A cat will arch his back and hiss. The best thing a sheep can do is say “baaa” which is not very intimidating. Just about any other domesticated animal can be returned to the wild and stand a small chance of surviving—at least for a while. But not sheep. Put a sheep in the wild and you’ve just given nature a snack.

What *do* sheep do when they sense danger? They gather together with other sheep and run in circles, each one hoping that the predator will choose someone else. This insures that the flock will get picked off, one by one. Sheep are dumb, directionless and defenseless. So when God calls us sheep, he means that when it comes to spiritual things, we are dumb, directionless and defenseless. And we do have an enemy and he is constantly sending spiritual predators after us. Without a shepherd we are completely at their mercy.

In ancient times, the Israelites needed a shepherd just as we do. They were dumb, directionless and defenseless just like we are. And God appointed shepherds for them, but tragically, those whom God appointed to be their shepherds betrayed them. Instead of guiding, feeding and protecting them by teaching them God's laws and leading them to worship him in the way he had taught, they flouted his laws and worshipped pagan Gods.

Who were these false shepherds? They were the kings and priests of Israel. It all began when Solomon married foreign wives and allowed them to spread their pagan religion around the land. The kings after Solomon followed in his footsteps as did the priests. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God condemned these false shepherds, saying "woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture! ...because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done."

Ezekiel, who lived at the same time as Jeremiah, raged against the priests and recorded in graphic detail examples of how corrupt they had become. They desecrated God's temple by inscribing pictures of "crawling things and detestable animals and other idols" on the walls of the temple and worshipping them.

In the innermost room of the temple—the holy of holies—they removed the Ark of the Covenant, set up a pagan altar and bowed down to, "the Gods of the east." The Aaronic priesthood had become a coven of idolaters. Under the influence of these false shepherds, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel became totally corrupt and vanished from history. The remaining two tribes—Judah and Benjamin—were conquered by the Babylonians, and hauled off into captivity.

After they were released, they continued to suffer under the despotic rule of the Greeks and the Romans until they were finally driven into exile and scattered over the face of the earth. Thus is the destiny of all those who depart from God's ways and chart their own journeys.

But God always preserves and cares for a remnant of his people. "as surely as I live," declares the sovereign Lord, "because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and become food for all the wild animals...I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays, I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak..." God himself would become the shepherd of his sheep. And so in the fullness of time, God came in the person of his

son, Jesus Christ, who announced that he was the good shepherd God had promised. He said, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Another interesting feature I learned about sheep is that they can recognize the voice of their shepherd. A Bible scholar by the name of Kenneth Bailey, who spent his life in the Mideast among Jewish and Arabic and Persian and Egyptian peasants, says that to this very day shepherds call their individual sheep by name and the sheep recognize their shepherd's voice and follow him.

They know to whom they belong and he knows them and they will not follow a stranger because they don't recognize his voice. And so God in his wisdom has provided these poor, stupid, directionless and defenseless creatures with the ability to recognize the voice of their shepherd who will take care of them and protect them from danger. In the same way, God gives us—the sheep of his flock—ears to hear the voice of our shepherd. Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, no one can snatch them out of my hand. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

David Brickner, the executive director of *Jews For Jesus*, tells the following story. There was a man on a train whose eyes were glued to the sights outside his window. He kept exclaiming, "wonderful! Wonderful!" As the train passed by slums, broken-down buildings, and vacated factories, his fellow passengers became somewhat irritated as he kept repeating, "wonderful! Wonderful!" Finally, the passenger next to him remarked tersely, "some of the things we're passing don't look so wonderful to me." The man replied, "I've been blind all of my life, but through recent medical advancements and the donation of two corneas, I can see for the very first time. And believe me my friend; to be able to see is wonderful! Wonderful!"

Like the man on the train, we once were blind but now we can see. God has given us eyes of faith which enable us to see Him at work in His kingdom. And like sheep who are dumb, directionless and defenseless, he has given us ears to hear the voice of our shepherd.

What we have heard and seen going on in the world over the past year with our natural eyes and ears has been disheartening, to say the least. We are seeing one more dreary chapter in the history of a fallen creation which has been decaying ever since sin entered the world. That may be hard to hear, but it's the truth. But for those of us who have eyes to see God at work in his kingdom and ears to hear the voice of our shepherd as He speaks to us through the scriptures, we know that God is in control and that in his own good time, he *makes everything work together for good for those who love him and have been called according to his purpose!* (Romans 8:28)

Who knows but that the danger and distress this pandemic has brought on us will draw people to a holy fear of God and that many souls will be saved. Wouldn't that be just like God? Maybe there's something going on that is wonderful after all.

Amen.