

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
May 15, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Shepherded by the Best

Psalms 23, Acts 2:42–47; 1 Peter 2:19–25; John 10:1–10

To paraphrase a quote from the famous English author, Charles Dickens's book, The Tale of Two Cities, "we live in the best of times and the worst of times." For example, we have the internet where trillions and trillions of bits of information are available to us in a matter of a minute's effort. What a feast of knowledge is available to our hungry minds. Out there is a plethora of advice on what to do with our money, relationships, health care, time, energy, education, and careers, and who to follow in doing so. But, how are we to know who can best shepherd us through this morass of options? The false stuff can really be bad, and the good stuff can really be good in these "best of times and worst of times."

Actually our dilemma has been part of the human condition from the beginning of civilization. Our ancient Hebrew brothers and sisters who had their own best of times and worst of times have pointed us in a direction to the One whom they found to be trustworthy, helpful, and true. The One they could safely follow.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," wrote the Hebrew Psalmist. This is a simple but profound statement of faith. "In the ancient world, kings were known as shepherds of their people. Thus to profess 'The LORD is my shepherd' is to declare one's loyalty to God, and intention to live under God's reign." To live under God's reign as our Shepherd, "contrary to the usual understanding" of Psalm 23 "is not aimed primarily at communicating a sense of peace and tranquility. It does this, to be sure, but its primary intent is to say that God keeps the psalmist alive. For a sheep, to be able to 'lie down in green pastures' means to have food; to be led 'beside still waters' means to have something to drink; to be led 'in right paths' means that danger is avoided and proper shelter is attained. In short, God 'restores my soul,' or, better translated, God 'keeps me alive.' The sheep lack nothing, because the shepherd provides the basic necessities of life—food, drink, and shelter."

"Thus the psalmist professes that his or her life depends solely on God, and that God keeps the psalmist alive" (despite all the evil that surrounds him, and even through any threats of death) "'for his name's sake.' All this is in keeping with God's fundamental character. God's character is one of goodness and mercy. God's goodness and mercy are illuminated further in God as the gracious host. God provides the table spread with food and drink, and provides a safe house in which the psalmist can dwell forever." TNIBC, Vol. IV, pgs. 767-768.

Our dilemma today is still to discern between such a shepherd as God is, and those who may be thought to be shepherds. How do we know when we are being shepherded by the best? Professor Wayne Brouwer, tells this humorous story that describes how we might know the true and best shepherd from one who is not the shepherd.

“There once was a busload of tourists traveling through Israel. Their Arab guide had just finished telling the visitors about how the Palestinian shepherd typically walks ahead of the flock, and the flock willingly follows the shepherd, like Jesus said, when one of the tourists looked out the window and saw a man driving a herd of sheep, brandishing a large, menacing-looking stick. Delighted with the opportunity to one-up the guide, he pointed out what he saw. The guide immediately stopped the bus, bounded down the steps and ran over to the man with the stick. The passengers could see the two men talking, gesticulating with their hands in animated Middle Eastern fashion. Finally, their guide turned and walked back to the bus, a big grin on his face.

Back aboard, the guide turned to the tourists and proclaimed in triumph, ‘I have just spoken to the man. Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know that he is not the shepherd. He is the butcher.’” It pays to stop and check out the credentials before declaring someone as the shepherd. “Emphasis,” March/April, 2005

Now, there is nothing wrong with being a butcher in the meat preparation sense. It is a noble profession. Yet, we do have so called shepherds today in all arenas of life that are more “butchers” than “shepherds” in the way they treat people. They show little goodness or mercy. They are the enemies in whose presence we need God to nurture and care for us.

A few years back a friend of mine sent me this version of Psalm 23 that is an answer back to the leaders who are “butchers” rather than “shepherds.” It is titled:

“Psalm 23 for the workplace.”

“The Lord is my real boss, and I shall not want. He gives me peace, when chaos is all around me. He gently reminds me to pray and do all things without murmuring and complaining. He reminds me that he is my source and not my job. He restores my sanity everyday and guides my decisions that I might honor him in all that I do. Even though I face absurd amounts of e-mails, system crashes, unrealistic deadlines, budget cutbacks, gossiping co-workers, discriminating supervisors and an aging body that doesn't cooperate every morning, I still will not stop--- for he is with me! His presence, his peace, and his power will see me through. He raises me up, even when they fail to promote me. He claims me as his own, even when the company threatens to let me go. His faithfulness and love is better than any bonus check. His retirement plan beats every 401k there is! When it's all said and done, I'll be working for him a whole lot longer and for that, I BLESS HIS NAME!!!!!!” May we always bless God's name!!!

We also bless God's name as we confess and follow Jesus, who is God the Good Shepherd with us. It is in our relationship to Jesus that God calls our name. “The intimacy of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is demonstrated by the sheep's ability to recognize the shepherd's voice, and the shepherd's ability to call ‘his own’ by name. To call the sheep by name may refer to the practice of giving pet names to individual sheep or it may simply mean to call each sheep individually. As a result of this intimacy, the sheep will follow the shepherd.” It is this intimacy, the shepherd knowing you and me by name that also protects us from what Jesus calls the

thief and bandit who tries to steal us away. The thief or bandit tries to enter the sheepfold, our lives, not through the gate, but over the fence. [TNIBC](#), Vol. IX, pg. 667.

Let's take a look at these fenced in sheepfolds. "In the Mediterranean world of Jesus, for example, sheepfolds were usually constructed adjoining the house and had a separate entrance gate. The only access to the sheepfold was through this gate. If the flock was large enough to require more than one shepherd, an undershepherd might be assigned the task of watching the sheepfold door at night. The roles of each of the characters in the figure are well defined and limited: The shepherd has the largest role, coming to the sheep, calling them by name, and leading them; the sheep respond to the shepherd and refuse to respond to the stranger. The thief, the bandit, and the stranger reflect potential threats to the sheep, and the economic livelihood of the shepherd." The shepherd is there to protect the sheep even with his own life. This is the same point Peter was making in the Epistle lesson to his early Christian congregation whose lives were being threatened for being Christians. Jesus was the shepherd who would protect them and he gave his life to show this. [TNIBC](#), Vol. IX, pg. 667.

To his disciples then and today, Jesus declared that he is not only the shepherd who knows our names and protects us with his life, but he is the "gate," the way to God. Jesus is God's grace. He is God's freely given gift of love, the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep so he could physically and spiritually be the gateway to God. It is through his shed blood that our sins, which have caused us to become lost sheep, or butchers instead of shepherds are erased. Yes, he did this so that we could return to his fold and have a whole relationship with God: Where we can live in the abundance of God's sheepfold; And, where God can feed us, guide us, and keep us safe from evil. Jesus is God's grace. He is the "gate," the way to God.

Within the fold, Jesus nurtures a welcoming community that draws others to him and to the fold. The early Christians in the passage from Acts were such a community. They responded completely to the Lord as their shepherd, and set a great example for us to follow. Their lives, livelihood, and new faith were in great danger for claiming the recently resurrected Jesus as their Lord and Shepherd. Daily, they joyfully gathered together as God's sheep in a sheepfold to worship their Lord, and care for each other as equals. They even sold all they had and shared it in common because they trusted God so greatly and needed each other so much. Behaving as such a close, caring, and welcoming community is what draws people to the Shepherd and his fold in modern times, as well.

In his book [To End All Wars](#), Ernest Gordon tells of how he and others experienced such a community in the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp made famous by the movie "The Bridge over the River Kwai." "The camp stood at the end of the Bataan death march that brought Allied soldiers deep into the jungles of Asia. Few would survive, and everyone knew it. In order to make the best of a terrible situation, they teamed up in pairs, each watching out for a buddy. One prisoner was a strapping six-foot-three fellow built like a tower of iron, but his buddy got malaria. The smaller fellow was much weaker, and very likely to die. Their captors did not want to deal with sickness, so anyone who was unable to work was confined in a "hot house" until he succumbed to heat exhaustion, dehydration, and the collapse of his bodily systems.

The sick man was locked into a hothouse and left to die. Surprisingly he did not die, because every mealtime his strong buddy went out to him, under curses and threats from the guards, and shared his meager rations. Every night his buddy braved the watchful eyes above that held guns of death, and brought his own slim blanket to cover the fevered convulsions of the sick man.”

“At the end of two weeks the sick man astounded the guards by recovering well enough to be able to return to work. He even survived the entire camp experience and lived to tell about it. His buddy, however — the strong man all thought invincible — died very shortly of malaria, exposure, and dysentery. He had given his life to save his friend. The story does not end there. When Allied troops liberated that camp at the close of the war in the Pacific, virtually every prisoner was a Christian. There was a symphony orchestra in camp, with instruments made of the crudest materials. There were worship services every Sunday, and the death toll was far lower than any expected. All this because of the silent testimony made by a strong man toward his buddy facing death, and the realization that apart from Jesus’ forgiving grace/ that develops God’s new humanity, we devolve into mere animals. We need a divine Shepherd to create community and guide us home.” “Emphasis,” March/April, 2005

After hearing all that has been said, how do you as an individual now respond to the good Shepherd calling your name? How do we as a worshipping community respond? I hope that people who come here to visit and are seeking the safety of a church home find our lives pointing in the direction of the One who is trustworthy, helpful, and true. I hope that they find us being shepherded by One who is the best, professing this Lord as our Shepherd, and living loyally under God’s reign, forever.