



National Bishop's Sermon for Opening Worship Synod of Alberta and the Territories Convention

Theme: Lots of Life

June 5, 2008

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

I Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

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.² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It is a pleasure to be here. And I bring you greetings from your sisters and brothers in Christ from coast to coast to coast that make up this part of the family of God that we call the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

The lessons for today, especially the 23rd psalm where the psalmist declares that the lord is my shepherd, are texts that contain very familiar words. They have been used so often that we probably all have special associations with the texts. For example, I remember being taken to the bible store by my grandfather, and being asked to read to him the 23rd psalm. When I showed him that I could do that, he bought me my very own bible.

The words are messages of promise and comfort, words that we turn to when we are in difficulty or need. These words are heard often at the sick bed, at funerals. Sometimes they are the only thing that can break through the barriers to communication. I have led worship at several different nursing homes and extended care facilities. Sometimes there have been residents that at first glance I wasn't sure how I was going to be able to communicate with them. They would not respond to my words or to my touch. There wasn't even any real eye contact. And yet, when it came to reciting together the 23rd psalm, there they would be, maybe not speaking very loud or very clearly, but saying the words of the psalm along with me, along with the congregation.

But as I thought about these texts this week I had to stop and ask myself some questions. Like what does it mean to be a shepherd? What does it mean to be sheep? And what does it mean to have God as our shepherd?

Now, I am a city girl, although while I was on internship the good people of Tavistock Ontario tried very hard to educate me in the ways of farming. So to learn about sheep I have done some reading about what it meant to be a shepherd in Jesus' time, and I have talked with farmers who had sheep. It seems that sheep do not take kindly to being chased or herded from behind. One man told me a joke about this. Apparently a teacher asked a youngster "If you have ten sheep and two go through the fence, how many will you have left?" The child replied "None. If two go through the fence, the rest will all follow." Well that answer will not get you far in terms of success in math, but it will help you to understand sheep. A good shepherd wouldn't try to herd the sheep from behind but instead would lead the sheep. The sheep would get to know the sound of the shepherds voice and would follow, like the nursery rhyme adds, wagging their tails behind them.

The shepherd would be out with the sheep in all kinds of weather, kind of like letter carriers...you know, Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds. And sheep are apparently vulnerable to injury, so that the conscientious shepherd would examine each sheep at day's end and apply oil to those who had been cut or bruised. And should any errant sheep wander from the flock, a good shepherd would quickly search out the lost sheep, carefully pick it up, and gently carry it home. Shepherding was no 9 to 5 job either. At the end of the day the shepherd remained with the sheep. Even if the sheep were in an enclosed area, the shepherd remained with them, lying like a gate to close off the flock from escape or danger.

All of this information is useful, but I must admit that I still have some difficulty trying to get a hold of what this image means - I guess I still need more lessons on the farm!

I'm not the only one who has had difficulty understanding this image. Apparently there are no shepherds in Toronto either. And a Sunday school teacher there was trying to explain to her students about the good shepherd. So she decided to see what substitutes her class could find. The class concluded that the important thing about shepherds was their relationship with

their sheep. The sheep trusted the shepherd and recognized the shepherd's voice and obeyed the shepherd's command.

So they tried to think of who they knew that might fit that description. They decided that school crossing guards might be similar to shepherds. They usually know the kids who come by name. They gather them together. They lead them to safety. And teachers - teachers know the flock by name too. They guide them through the uncharted wilderness of new ideas. The class decided that firefighters and nurses were kind of like shepherds too. When you're in danger, or hurt, they come to rescue you. And finally they decided that mothers were a lot like shepherds too.

Someone else must have thought the same thing, because I found this paraphrase of the 23rd psalm that compares the shepherd's job with that of a mommy.

*"My mommy holds my hand; I'm not afraid. She takes me to school in the mornings; She sets me free in the playgrounds and parks; She helps me feel good. She shows me how to cross the streets, Because she loves me. Even when we walk downtown, among the crowds and the cars, I will not be afraid; If I can reach out for her hand or her coat, I know she's with me, and I'm all right. And sometimes when I've fallen down and I'm all covered with mud and I come home crying, She picks me up in her arms, She wipes my hands and dries my tears, And I just hafta cry again, Cause she loves me so much. How can anything go wrong, when I have that kind of mommy? I want to live all the rest of my life with Mommy in my Mommy's house for ever'n'ever."***

The core of the message of today's lessons, the reason for the use of the image of sheep and shepherd, is that they tell us how much we are loved by God. And what a strong image of God's love and concern and tender care for us. Providing us with abundant life – with Lots of Life!!

How are we doing as sheep? How are we doing at following our shepherd? Are we truly appreciative of the abundant life that our God provides for us? I think in today's consumeristic society it is hard for us to recognize and appreciate the abundant life that we have been given. Our society preaches a message of scarcity instead of abundance. We are taught to compare ourselves only with those that have more, to constantly work to amass better, newer and MORE accumulations of material goods. The pictures of the abundant life that we are shown in advertising have to do with plenty in terms of material goods. Our society has confused the difference between needs and wants.

The abundant life that God provides addresses our needs. And frankly compared to the majority of the rest of the world we are all doing extremely good in the wants department too. But are we able to move from a theology of scarcity to a theology of abundance and thank God, our Lord of Life, for all that we have been given?

And how are we doing as shepherds? Jesus, the good shepherd, is a model for us, loving the world as God intended. And there's the key word - MODEL. You see, the ministry that we see in the love and care of the shepherd, the tenderness and concern that we have experienced, these must be acted out as well as accepted. Now that we have experienced the shepherd's care for us in our daily life and in our afflictions, we are commissioned to bring the same selfless, caring love to others. 1 Peter chapter 5 (verse 2) calls on us "to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it --not for sordid gain but eagerly." We are called to be shepherds. But what kind of shepherds are we going to be?

What we are called to do is straightforward. The job description is specific and well laid out. We are called to be instruments of God's healing and saving love to those around us. Being a *good* shepherd entails feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, encouraging the weary, bandaging the hurt, recovering the straggler, - these are the same tasks that we are called to do over and over again in scripture. Sounds a lot like being a church in mission for others!

It's not easy to be a good shepherd, but then we were never promised that it would be easy. But we are not called to this task and then abandoned. We have been given the company and support of *all* those who profess the name of Jesus the good Shepherd. And even better, we have the assurance that God, our shepherd, our Lord of Life, is with us. To care for us. To lead us. To bring us back when we go off track. To be with us, even in the darkest valley. And to continue to provide us with abundant life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

***NOTE: We have been trying to track down the copyright information for this quote but have been unsuccessful at confirming where the original text first appeared. This information will be updated once it is available.*