

THEME Relationship with the Shepherd

SCRIPTURE [*Jesus said:*] *My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me*

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INTRODUCTION – Shepherd’s Sunday

Several weeks ago, our music director, Newton, reminded me that we were quickly approaching “Shepherd Sunday,” a term often applied to this particular Sunday on our church calendar every year– the 4th Sunday of Easter. It’s easy to see why. The Psalm designated for this Sunday is always the beloved 23rd Psalm, *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*” Shepherd imagery is also evident in today’s reading from Revelation in which we’re given a glimpse of a vision with a Lamb at the center of the divine heavenly throne – a lamb who will be the shepherd to guide the redeemed to “*springs of the water of life.*” And in the gospel reading from John, Jesus once again uses shepherd/sheep metaphors to describe his relationship with those who follow him: “*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*” These readings all speak of Jesus as the shepherd and us as sheep.

Sheep, Cows, and Camels

Now some of us may find it somewhat distasteful being referred to by Jesus as “sheep.” Sheep are often thought to be rather stupid and dumb creatures. However, one man who actually grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest reports that Sheep are not dumb at all. In fact, he reports that it’s cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading this misconception because sheep do not behave like cows. Anyone who has watched movies of the “Old West” know that cows are herded from the rear by shouting cowboys and cracking whips. There is a reason for the term “**cattle drives**” with the cowboys who drive the cattle referred to as “**drovers**”. Cattle are driven. So are camels.

Several years ago when I was on a study tour in the Holy Land, our group was taken to Mount Sinai. We were given the option to either hike up the mountain to the top or to ride a camel. I opted for the camel. As I sat astride my camel, some six feet up in the air, I was a little concerned to see that my camel’s owner not holding the camel’s head harness and leading the animal up the trail. Instead, he walked behind the camel on the narrow trail flicking a rope at the animal’s back legs – he was, in fact, driving the camel. I couldn’t help but wonder what might happen to me if the camel decided to just take off on a run on his own as there was nothing to stop the camel from doing so!

Sheep are a very different matter. Those of us who have never been around herds of sheep probably miss a great deal of the imagery used by Jesus when he describes himself as the shepherd and those who follow him as sheep.

A while back *National Geographic* magazine (September, 1993) had an article describing a modern sheep-herding people, the Rabari of India. Among the Rabari, all the shepherds and their various flocks gather together into one large flock at night. The shepherds share the night watches. Some will sleep while others patrol so that the sheep are never left unguarded. Any predator and thief has no opportunity because of their constant vigilance. When morning comes, things change. “Each shepherd has slightly different calls, variations on a theme. There are morning calls to move out, a call to

bring the sheep to water, and so on. Each man knows his own sheep and vice versa, such that each shepherd's particular flock will disentangle itself from the larger flock and move out behind him in the morning. This may or may not seem astonishing, until one realizes that perhaps 5000 sheep are gathered together in the single large nighttime flock."

So What Did Jesus Have in Mind?

This is the picture that Jesus seems to have had in mind— A shepherd doesn't **drive** sheep; a shepherd **leads** sheep. A reciprocal relationship of intimate knowledge develops between the sheep and the shepherd – one of knowing and of being known. Sheep seem to recognize the shepherd as part of their family and learn to recognize the shepherd's voice. The sheep know the shepherd to whom they belong and that is the only voice they will follow. The sheep trust the shepherd such that the shepherd can walk right through a sleeping flock of sheep without disturbing any of them. But if a stranger steps inside the fold, pandemonium results. Likewise, a good shepherd learns to distinguish his sheep from one another and can distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure.

The relationship of the shepherd to the sheep is also one of personal leadership. The shepherd leads the sheep. In Psalm 23 we are told, *He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake* (Ps 23: 2-3). The shepherd does not send the sheep ahead while he remains behind. The shepherd goes everywhere the sheep go.

The relationship to the shepherd leads to life for the sheep. The shepherd's leadership has a goal in mind: to provide the sheep with the necessities for their welfare and prosperity, especially nourishing good food and good water. The shepherd's concern is not that the sheep merely subsist, but that they be healthy and prosperous

Finally this is a relationship in which the shepherd rescues and protects from enemies. The mark of a good shepherd is the one who will give everything for the sake of the sheep, even his life. Jesus makes our danger, His danger in order to protect and rescue us.

The Point of Today's Gospel

This is what Jesus seems to be trying to tell us. *My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me*. Jesus knows us and wants the kind of relationship with us so we hear his voice and follow him.

The Difficulty

Unlike sheep however, we humans can easily allow the Shepherd's voice to be drowned out by other competing voices in our world: telephones ring; beepers go off; Ipods and MP3 players are plugged in so the music is always playing' cell phones or palm pilots vibrate, bringing messages that demand "immediate attention;" spouses, children, careers make endless demands on our time and energies. It's all too easy to become so distracted or busy that we hear nothing but the noise around us, forgetting to listen for the shepherd's voice.

What are we to do?

A Truck Ramp and Worship

Anyone who has traveled on mountain roads will have seen signs alerting drivers to the runaway truck ramp: one mile ahead, 1/2 mile ahead, 1/4 mile, then the ramp. The dirt track leading off the highway is graded steeply upward so that a runaway rig with failing brakes can go barreling onto it and

be slowed by the incline to a gradual stop. It's smart highway planning and a safety feature designed to prevent disastrous accidents.

Perhaps our coming together each week for worship is like a truck ramp, designed to help slow us down when our lives begin to go out-of-control. Worship is directed toward the many of us whose brakes have failed on a runaway path.

Worship offers us a time to slow down, stop, and listen. It provides an opportunity to take a few moments to hear the Shepherd's voice in scripture, prayer, and the Holy Eucharist. During worship, Jesus speaks words of forgiveness and life to us, seeking to lead each of us beside still waters, seeking a relationship with each one of us. Worship is a time to hear Jesus call to us and to learn to recognize His voice.

Closing Story– 23rd Psalm

There was a large rally being held and a renowned actor had been invited to come and recite the 23rd Psalm. As the actor approached the microphone, the audience fell silent with bated expectancy, awaiting what they knew would be a magnificent rendition of the famous Psalm. In a resonant and mellow voice, and with great dramatic fervor, the actor began: "*The Lord is my shepherd*", slowing spinning out the words. When he had finished, the crowd erupted with applause at his performance.

Then, as the actor left the podium, an old man, bent over with age, tottered up to the same microphone and began in a trembling and gravelly voice to recite the Psalm once again. At first, you could feel surprise and irritation rustle through the crowd at this unexpected interruption. But as the old man proceeded, a hush fell over the crowd and then a profound silence. When he had finished, no one stirred; there was no applause; only silence. But tears were falling from many eyes.

As the old man turned to leave the microphone, the actor leaned over to the master of ceremonies and asked: "What happened? I know I read Psalm 23 beautifully, but I didn't stir the crowd like that old man."

The emcee responded: "That old man - **he knows the shepherd.**"