

PSALM 23 (p. 441)

APRIL 22, 2018

JOHN 10:11-18 (p. 870)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Awaken us to your Presence, Lord, and fill us with your Holy Spirit. Calm our spirits so that we might hear your voice. Open our minds so that we might learn your truth. And touch our hearts, please, so that we might come to know you that much better. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“CHOICES”

According to a story in “Leadership Journal”, a group of Turkish soldiers during World War I tried to steal a flock of sheep from a hillside outside of Jerusalem. The sleeping Shepherd suddenly awoke to find his flock being driven off by the bandits. With no hope of re-capturing his flock single-handedly, the Shepherd put his hands to his mouth and gave out his own special call—the one that he used daily to gather his sheep into the fold. The sheep, on hearing the familiar sound, immediately stopped to listen. And then, when they heard it again, turned and rushed down into the ravine and up the other side, stopping right to the feet of their Shepherd.

The whole thing happened so quickly that it was impossible for the soldiers to corner the fleeing sheep. Because of their unique relationship with the Shepherd, because of their daily contact in his presence, the sheep knew his call, and reacted immediately! Before the enemy could pursue them, the sheep and the Shepherd were safely away. “I am the Good Shepherd,” says our Lord Jesus. “My sheep know my voice and respond to my call.” That’s the take home for today, in a nutshell!

We are told in Scripture, often, that Jesus is our Shepherd! Simply put, we are those who follow His lead! But have you ever considered what it means to be a member of His flock? What does it take to be part of this herd? What does Shepherding look like from where we stand? What choices do we need to make as faithful sheep? And most importantly, how can those of us in the fold best discern the Good Shepherd's call? All four suggested Lectionary readings for today, deal with these questions.

In 1 John, chapter three, the Apostle highlights the amazing love of our Shepherd. He laid down His life for us, willingly. John then goes on to emphasize that we need to be willing to lay down our lives for each other, for our brothers and sisters in Christ. That is the essence of flock mentality!

Acts chapter four, finds Peter and John standing before the Great Sanhedrin, explaining why they healed a man. They did it, they say, because they follow the Shepherd. In His Name they performed the miracle. For His Glory the man was made whole. "Salvation is found in no one else", they proclaim! Following Jesus is the only way for wayward sheep to find their way home! Not to mention the only source of green pastures and still waters. Therefore, those of us who are doing the following, need to keep our eyes on Him.

Then we have the beloved Twenty-Third Psalm. Our first reading this morning. I'm sure you know it. Probably well! Maybe some of you have memorized it. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul."

“His rod and His staff, they comfort me!” A rod, to keep us moving forward. And a staff, or crook, to keep us heading in the right direction. “He guides me along righteous paths. He prepares a table before me, in the presence of my enemies. Even though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will not fear!” It’s pretty self-explanatory, isn’t it.

Which bring us to our Gospel lesson. Where Jesus again says, “I am the Good Shepherd”. “I call my sheep, and they know my voice.” Even when surrounded by danger,” like those sheep in World War I, “my sheep come when I call! “I am the gate by which they enter, the Shepherd whom they follow. I love those who follow me. In fact, I love them so much, that I willingly lay down my life for them!”

There is theme here, isn’t there. A thread that weaves its way throughout the texts, throughout Scripture! Jesus is our Shepherd, our Lord! And we are the furry little critters that follow Him! But what does that look like? What does it take to be a member of this flock?

Today is called “Shepherd Sunday” in church tradition. Hence the texts, right. And each one of these lessons would have made perfect sense to any First Century Shepherd, or anyone who lived around a First Century Shepherd! Everyone in all of Israel would have immediately gotten the metaphors! The sheep references would have been obvious! Only none of us are First Century Shepherds, are we, or know First Century Shepherds!

For that matter, most of us don't even know any Shepherds at all! So, we might need a little explaining. Unfortunately for you, my entire repertoire of sheep knowledge, comes from watching Saturday morning cartoons as a kid. And reading a bunch of books, of course, but the cartoons are way more fun! I'm thinking about the Wiley E. Coyote cartoons. Do you remember those? Not the ones with the Road Runner though. They don't have any sheep. I'm thinking about the Wiley E. Coyote cartoons with those two great big Sheepdogs.

Every morning, just as the sun starts to crest over the hills, one of those two Sheepdogs reports for work. He punches the time-clock, sets his lunchbox down beside a tree, and relieves the other Sheepdog from duty. He then settles in for whatever the day might bring! The faithful guardian is now in place. It's his turn to watch over the flock! Do you remember any of that?

The hungry Coyote would try every trick in the book to steal a sheep from the flock. But the ever-vigilant Sheepdog dutifully thwarted each and every one! He wasn't about to let a predator abscond with one of his care! They were his responsibility, and he handled it well, all day, each and every day! And yet, at the end of the day, after all the near disasters, just as the sun was about to dip below the horizon, the second Sheepdog would report for duty. He also would punch in and take up his post. And then the first guy would just walk away! That always bothered me. For some reason, he was no longer accountable. That seemed kind of strange.

Another thing that seemed strange was that during this time, with all those potential dangers lurking about, the sheep always seemed oblivious! Not one of them realized the tremendous effort that the Sheepdog put in on their behalf! Oh, there might be a bleat or two every now and then, just before they were rescued from the Coyote's hands. But almost immediately, when the danger was over, they'd go right back to munching on their own little patch of grass! They had no clue how much work went into protecting them, no inkling of the sacrifice involved on their behalf!

And those Sheepdogs, if you recall, were just hired hands! The sheep didn't even belong to them! They punched in and out, remember. Just did their job. Their guardianship was only part-time, just a portion of their lives. So, can you imagine how well the owner of the flock would take care of His own sheep? "I'm the Good Shepherd," says Jesus. "I lay down my life for my sheep."

So, does that make us the totally oblivious flock? I wonder sometimes! What I mean is, how much time do we spend just grazing away, day in and day out, completely unaware of the dangers that lurk around us? How often are we so engrossed in our own little patch of grass that we don't even notice how much the Good Shepherd has done on our behalf, let alone listen to what He is calling us to do? And how many times are we so focused on feeding our own faces, that we don't even notice the other sheep around us, maybe even sheep in danger or distress?

And here is the thing, we're not just the sheep! All through the New Testament we're reminded that we are actually the Sheepdogs! That's one of the foundational premises of the Protestant Reformation, right, the "Priesthood of all Believers"! In other words, not all Sheepdogs wear collars! As great as those Sheepdogs were, in my Wiley E. Coyote cartoons, each one of us is called to be even better! Jesus is our example, our ideal, the One who laid down His life for the Flock! And we are called to do the same! That thought may be way bigger than we have ever considered! But clearly, you and I are the ones responsible for those around us!

Let's face it, Sheepdogs and Sheep look a lot alike, don't they! They both have four legs and are both covered in fur. They both lie down in the same pastures, green or otherwise. They drink from the same pools, which are hopefully still! The same rain falls on the backs of the Sheep and Sheepdogs. And the same cold winds threaten to blow them away! The same things startle Sheepdogs and Sheep. It may be difficult to tell them apart sometimes! The same dangers abound in both of their worlds. Wolves and lions and bears threaten each one! And the very same temptations assail them, greener-looking pastures and such! And let's be honest, they even smell alike! So, what's your role on the farm?

A Second-Shift Sheepdog, waiting in the wings for your turn to punch in, isn't who Jesus calls us to be! Nor is the ever-vigilant, First-Shift Sheepdog, who is only waiting for his turn to punch out! That won't do either! Neither one of these part-time guardians is the model we find in the Biblical witness? That's not enough to take care of this Flock!

Being the Body of Christ is actually more like being a parent. It's a twenty-four hour a day, seven day a week, for the rest of your life kind of thing! We called to jump-in and help whenever it's needed! And do whatever it takes! Loving each and every one of the Flock, all the time! That's our responsibility, as part of the fold! We are called to be Guardians at the Gate!

But are we? Are we feeding and caring for the entire Flock? Are we protecting the rest of the fold? Are we doing this, even to the point of giving up our life for them? How about at least some of our free-time? Are we willing to give that up? Or are we simply playing the role of an oblivious sheep? The job of the Good Shepherd is obvious! But we are called to follow His lead, to be the Body for each other, to care for, to love one another, with actions, not just words! "We know what love is," John tells us, "that Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for each other!"

So, would you? Would you really? Would you do that for your brothers and sisters? Would you give up your life for that furry little sheep sitting next to you, or for the one in front of you or behind you? Or for the one across the aisle? Or for those who, for whatever reason, have already wandered off?

I know you shouldn't push metaphors too far. But this Sheep one, seems to have legs! It also forces us to look at our role in the Flock! So, are you a Leader, showing others the source of strength and nourishment? Are you an Encourager, bleating and nudging in order to help your sisters and brothers make it safely home?

Are you a “Nuzzler” maybe, one who demonstrates a deep sense of love—or a Barker, one who helps keep the flock moving in the right direction? Are you simply oblivious, completely unaware, focused entirely on the little patch of grass in front you? It kind of makes you think, doesn’t it? Let’s assume you’re not a stubborn old goat, dug in, determined to do things your way, no matter what! And thank heavens you are not a Judas Goat!

According to those books on flock mentality, sheep tend to trust the other animals around them, even the goats. Slaughterhouses, for years, took advantage of this fact. They would train a goat, called a Judas Goat, to lead the flock astray. They would teach it to walk up a ramp while all the unsuspecting sheep followed. At the top of the ramp, though, a gate would open, and the Judas Goat would quickly exit. But all the sheep continued on. A well-trained Judas Goat could play that role over and over again, betraying countless, unsuspecting Sheep, leading each one right to slaughter! I’ll bet you can guess how they got the name, can’t you! So, what’s your role here in the Flock?

Again, our model, our mentor, is Jesus, our Lord! So, we need to keep our eye on Him! “I am the Good Shepherd,” He says. “I willingly lay down my life for my sheep.” I am not some hired hand who avoids responsibility, or only works part-time! I’m not one who runs away at the first sign of danger, or a day-laborer who thinks only of himself!

I don’t distance myself when there is pain involved. I stay the course! I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the Flock! And you, therefore, as my Disciples, as those who say they want to follow me, need to be willing to do the same!

That's the reason that we have been called together as a Flock! Because in doing this, we make God's Love, and God's Presence known! We proclaim to the world what God's love is really like! And how well we do this, comes down to the choices we make.

Jean Paul Sartre, a French Philosopher asserted "that the thing that makes us human, that which separates us from the animals, is our ability to choose. In every circumstance in life," he says "we have the freedom to choose, even if we don't realize that we are choosing. Our lives are not a given. We are not genetically or socially predetermined to do anything! Our lives are actually the sum total of the choices that we make!" As Christians we usually call it "free will". But it's the same thing, isn't it?

Will you choose to run away when things get tough, then? Or choose to stay and be faithful? Will you choose to look out for others, or choose to think only of yourself? Will you choose to boldly declare your faith, like Peter and John in front of the Sanhedrin—choose to boldly state that Salvation is found in no other name under heaven than Jesus Christ? Or will you choose to slink away, hoping to be unnoticed?

Will you choose to love the other sheep around you, all of the other sheep around you, including those who are scruffy, and those who are in other sheep pens? Will you choose to love all of those who listen to the Shepherd's call, our own flock, and all "those others", even to the point of death? Will you choose to act like a hired hand, and punch out when we think you've had enough? Or choose to lead others astray? It does really come down to choices!

With that in mind, how are we doing with the flock entrusted to our care? Sheep can be skittish you know, and more than a little stubborn. Sheep will wander away if you don't pay attention, and even bleat at you when you try to pull them out of a ditch! It's tough to be a Shepherd, or a Sheepdog, or even a fellow sheep!

One of those books I mentioned, titled, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, suggests that sheep need four things in order to be content. First, they need to be free of fear. Green pastures and still waters are not enough! Sheep need to know that they are loved, and that they belong. Second, sheep need to be free from friction with other sheep. We are very social creatures you know. We need to have the hurts between us healed. Third, for sheep to settle down, happy and whole, we need to be free from irritants. That's what the "anoints my head with oil" phrase means. Shepherds would use oil to keep irritating flies at bay. And fourth, sheep need to be fed. Wholeness can't happen when hunger abounds!

According to modern Psychology, people are quite similar. In order to thrive, we each need a place to belong, to be part of the flock. Also, a way to receive, and then to give—to be nourished, and then to help nourish others. A way to return to joy after an emotional set back—to receive that oil of comfort. And a way to mature, to start living the way God created us to be. I guess we can learn a lot by watching the flock. Maybe even what it means to follow the Shepherd. And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Oh Lord, thank you for all the blessings that you constantly bestowed upon us! They are so plentiful, and far too abundant for us to even number! Thank you for our lives, and for our families and friends that you have brought into them! Thank you for this church family, and for the love that we share with each other! Thank you for this day, Lord, and this time of worship, for hearts that are filled with love, and minds that are open to guidance! And thank you for your Spirit, which gives the breath of life to all these things!

You are our source of strength Lord, and our one true hope. Salvation is found in no other name! You are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. And you are the One we turn to in both celebration and pain. So, Lord, as we do that today, please turn to us as well, and smile upon us. We lift up before you.....

Grant healing, Lord, where this is needed. And peace, Lord, on troubled hearts and lives. Pour out your guidance on those who are lost. Reach out your hand to those who search. Give compassion, Lord, and overflowing love to those who hurt. Bring joy, Lord, to those who are in despair. And give eternal life, Lord, to all who call upon your Name.

Bless us now, Lord, your church, this little flock that meets in the shelter of angel's wings. And cause us to be a blessing to others. Empower us to boldly proclaim your Truth, and lovingly share your heart. Use us, Lord, as instruments of your peace and your presence, as radiant beams of your light and your love, in this ever-darkening world.

We ask these things in Jesus' Name, and lift them before your Altar of Grace, along with the very prayer that He taught us, saying, Our Father...

COMMUNION

Have you ever noticed how our own burdens seem so much heavier than those of others? “Minor Surgery” always happens to someone else. Relationship problems are worse at home, than anywhere else. My Cross is far heavier, far more burdensome to bear than yours. Maybe coming to this Table and being reminded of the Cross that Jesus bore on our behalf, being reminded of just how heavy it really was, will free us up to cheerfully help others carry their burdens?

OFFERING

Numbers 15 suggests that there are three different situations when offerings to God are considered appropriate. “To fulfill a vow”, in other words, because we said we would, as part of our responsibility. “As a freewill offering”, in other words, when we just want to give to God. “At appointed Feasts”, in other words, as part of the way we Worship the Lord.