

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
May 3, 2009  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: The Shepherd's Love and Care Unites,  
Psalm 23, I John 3: 16-24, John 10: 11-18

“A sheep rancher decided to try playing music for his sheep to soothe their nerves, perhaps put them in the mood for growing better wool and producing more offspring. He got his old Hi-Fi, and set it up in the barn where the sheep gathered. He put on a record and it began to play. He was shocked to see his ram charge out of the barn, repeatedly ramming his head against a very solid corner fence post. Frantically trying to calm the animal and save it from harm, he finally paused long enough to listen to the music coming from the barn. The needle on the old-fashioned stereo record player had stuck in the groove, repeating at least 100 times Frank Sinatra's immortal phrase, ‘There'll never be another ewe.’ Turning the stereo off probably saved the ram's life.”

Bill Mosley in “Emphasis.”

For the record, fortunately, God is a much better sheep rancher or shepherd than this. In these times of economic upset caused in great part by bad financial shepherds and the uncertainty of a flu pandemic, we become much more aware of our need for God to shepherd us through the darkest valleys, and to help us find green pastures, still waters and restoration of our souls. 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 times of economic upset and pandemics have pointed us in a direction to the One they found to be trustworthy, nurturing, and the true shepherd.

“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 when we profess ‘The LORD is my shepherd’ we are declaring our loyalty to God, and our intention to live under God’s reign.” It was the responsibility of kings to provide for and protect the people, but they frequently failed to do so. In contrast to the failure of earthly kings, God does what “a shepherd is supposed to do: provide life and security for the people. Thus the psalmist affirms, ‘I shall lack nothing.’”

“Contrary to the usual understanding, the imagery in (this Psalm) 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 in providing

the table spread, as in communion, with food and drink, and in providing a safe house in which the psalmist can dwell forever. [TNIBC](#), Vol. IV, pgs. 767-768.

Our dilemma today is often to discern between such Godly shepherds and those who only appear to be shepherds. Professor Wayne Brouwer tells this story that describes how we might know the difference. "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 in John, 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.'" "Emphasis,"

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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 areas 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 a modern paraphrased 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!!!!!!"

We bless God's name in our following Jesus, who is God the 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." [TNIBC](#), Vol. IX, pg. 667.

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. This is like what hackers try to do with our computers by sneaking in their worms, Trojans, and viruses. It is what the world does in trying to seduce us to worship sex, power, fame, money, and it's versions of success instead of God.

“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 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 (or refuse to respond to a stranger); and the thief, the bandit, and the stranger reflect potential threats to the sheep, and the economic livelihood of the shepherd.” [NIBC](#), Vol. IX, pg. 667.

Jesus said that he is not only the shepherd who knows our names, but he is the “gate,” the way to God. Jesus is God’s grace. He is God’s freely given gift of love who has made it possible for all sheep, all people, to have a safe and whole relationship with God. He is the good shepherd who even calls out the name of those of us who have gone astray on our own, who have become “butchers of people” instead of shepherds, and who have followed false shepherds, to invite us back into the flock.

Actually, Jesus did not just stand at the gate and call out our names, as the good shepherd he laid down his life for the sheep to physically and spiritually be the gateway to God. It is through his shed blood that our sins, that kept us out of God’s sheepfold, are erased. He did this so that we could live in the abundance of God’s sheepfold where God can feed us, guide us, and keep us safe from the wild beasts of evil.

Jesus, the good shepherd does not remain in the sheepfold. He leads us out into the world. He sets the example of how we are to live and teaches how to love one another by putting our love in action as he did. As it says in I John 3 “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” In his book [To End All Wars](#), Ernest Gordon tells of this love in action what he and others experienced 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. His smaller buddy got malaria, 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 sick man who suffered from fevered convulsions.

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 good shepherd to set the example and guide us to put love into action. 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 church, a worshipping community respond? Do we put Christ's shepherding love into action? I see it in action in our hosting families through CIHN and our participation in the Day of Giving. I hope that people who come here to visit and are seeking the safety of a church home find our words and lives pointing in the direction of the divine shepherd who is trustworthy, nurturing, and true.