

BGO Sermon for 9-18-16 – A City Boy Ponders Sheep

Psalm 23 Isaiah 53:2-8 (NKJV) John 10 (NLT)

We're in kind of an "in-between" time right now. We're pretty much done with summer, and it's not officially fall yet, though the schools are already well into the school year and the fall sports seasons. Same thing with our churches: we're moving out of that "summertime" feel, and moving toward our fall activities: yard sales, dinners, plans for holidays to come. We're also in between preaching series here, coming out of the "getting to know the pastor" series we began in July. Next week and the week after, I'll get to have the pleasure many of you have had, hearing both Les Graham and Tom Robbins preach in our churches. The plan after that is to begin a worship series called "Revival" based on a book by pastor and author Adam Hamilton. We'll share some of the life of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, and some of what it means to be part of that movement still today. As we share that, we also hope to share some of the pictures and thoughts Amy and I had from our trip across the pond, as many of you have asked about our adventures in England, and on the Isle of Man.

I want to share just one part of those adventures today, from one of our first days on the Isle. We stayed at Old Lonan Church Farm, and it was just as you'd imagine an old farm from the British Isles being like: dirt farm roads with stone fencing; pasture land stretching as far as you can see; horses, cattle and sheep nearby in the fields. I didn't realize how nearby until we took a walk down one of those dirt roads; I turned a corner and there was a big ol' sheep right in front of me. Seems this one had found a way out of the pasture, and didn't seem to be in much of a hurry to get back in. I was all ready to go up to it for a closer look til my lovely and much more animal savvy bride stopped me, reminded me to not spook it and keep my voice low. Well, we and the sheep wandered past each other, and it was still on the loose on our way back.

But before we headed back, we wandered into a nearly-empty field, trying to make our way to the shoreline. I say nearly-empty because in that field was one little lamb, nearby a gate; again, another that strayed from the fold, but this little lamb seemed like it was desperately trying to get inside but couldn't figure out how.

I saw where I thought it got out at, a small opening under the gate. And I heard what I can only guess was the mama sheep bleating it's heart out on the other side, trying to coax her baby back in. Amy reminded me again not to startle the lamb, but I wanted to try to help it back in somehow, so I tried walking up to it, edging around it, trying to steer it toward the hole, but that just seemed to scare it more. We backed off and watched for a bit, and it did finally make it back in.

And after that, as we wandered, I wondered: first what's the best way you'd get a lamb back where it's supposed to be. Then I thought of us, how we're all like sheep who've wandered off and gotten lost; we've all done our own thing, gone our own way. And I wondered what might be the best way to help people come back into God's fold.

First, let's be clear. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through him. Jesus says it himself: ***"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep...Those who come in through me will be saved."***

So how do we help get others through?

There is the way I tried it on the Isle of Man - work at intimidating the sheep, drive them back through the gate. And I'm sure that has been successful - on occasion. But my guess would be that more often than not the sheep just scatter, or bang their heads against the gate.

That's the way that many Christians, and many pastors, have tried to bring salvation: by scaring people into Heaven. There's truth there, to be sure: we do need to flee from the wrath to come, and I can't think of anything more terrifying than an eternity apart from God and God's abundant goodness. And there have been those that have been scared straight. But more often, when you come at people with condemnation and judgment, they scatter. Even more, they become all that more resistant to the idea of coming into the fold; it amazes me sometimes how defensive some people become when I ask what I think are non-threatening questions about the Bible or their faith, all because they think I'm going to start preaching at them.

Now, if you really WANT to drive sheep toward a gate, I've seen a better way, and that's with a sheepdog: quicker, more agile, more efficient. We have that kind of sheepdog in our human lives. Maybe you call it conscience, or the Holy Spirit working ahead of us, but there is that still small voice that speaks to us, sometimes hounding us, pointing out our failing and pointing to our need for being saved from ourselves. And while it can drive us forward, it doesn't show us the gate we need.

On the Isle of Man, I seriously thought about trying to rush up and grab the lamb and lift it over the fence, me being so fleet of foot and all. And haven't parents tried that with their lost lambs: grab them by the scruff of the neck, and carry them to church. You might get them to church that way, but you can't carry your kids into Heaven.

More effective would be the way the mama sheep did it, bleating out cries of love and encouragement so the lamb could find the way; of course, it would have been better if Mama had been where the lamb could see her. I'll come back to this in a bit.

One of the best solutions for that situation would have been if the farmer was there - someone the lamb recognized, someone to shepherd the lamb back into the fold. We as Christians recognize our need for a shepherd; again, we've all been those sheep who've wandered off and gotten lost, at one point in our lives. So Jesus comes to us as our shepherd.

And how Good our Good shepherd is to us! He protects us from the wolves that would terrorize us and the bandits that would steal our joy. When we are troubled, he brings peace like pools of still water. He brings us to green pastures to provide for us, serving us a six-course dinner right in front of our enemies. He walks with us even in our most difficult times, when it's like we're going through the darkest valley. He revives our drooping heads, anointing them with oil. And because of Christ's love, our cups brim over with blessing. And most importantly, he restores our souls, reestablishing the relationship between us and God, and sending the Holy Spirit, both to remind us of Christ's teaching and to work in transforming us into Christ's image.

I thought of a shepherd, and the Good Shepherd, while I was in the field on the Isle. But another thought came to me: what if someone could actually become a lamb, to show the lamb where the gate was and how to enter in. The lamb could see that it could be done, could follow into the pasture.

That's what Christ did for us. He took up the cause of all the black sheep by becoming one Himself - the Righteous One of God taking on human flesh. ***"Behold, The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*** That was John the Baptist's proclamation. Not only did Jesus lay down His place in Heaven, He laid down his life, the Good Shepherd giving His life for the sheep. Isaiah proclaims God's plan: ***Like a lamb taken to be slaughtered and like a sheep being sheared, he took it all in silence...took on his own shoulders the sin of the many. He took the punishment, and that made us whole. The plan was that he give himself as an offering for sin so that he'd see life come from it—life, life, and more life.*** That's the gift that we receive: life, life, and more life - life and breath in this world, a richer and more satisfying life, and more life in the life to come as part of God's Eternal Flock. Christ the Lamb made the way for us.

Proclaiming God's great gift in Christ should be the main focus our worship, and the main goal of our lives, but there's a point in a message like this we start to ask, "What does this mean for us today?" Two points I'd bring to the front:

First, Jesus says, "***I know my own sheep, and they know me.***" Christ-followers recognize his voice and come to him. I always have to ask, even in a church service: Do you know the Shepherd? Do you recognize the voice of God calling to you to come and follow? Or are you listening to the voices of the thieves and robbers, who only want to steal your joy? If you don't know the Shepherd, folks, the gate is open to you - the gate to Heaven itself. Christ is calling, even now.

But Jesus also says "***I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.***" Our District Superintendent Sylvester Weatherall said something this week at a clergy gathering, a reminder of what I heard at the College of Christian Life: *Shepherds don't make sheep - sheep make sheep.*

Folks, as a pastor, when I talk to people about Jesus, it's a paid announcement; when you tell people about Jesus and what he's done for you, it's a testimony. When you share your faith with others, they hear not just your voice; through the power of the Holy Spirit they hear Christ's voice speaking to them. Paul's words to the Romans speak to us: ***But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?*** Folks, find those other sheep, maybe the ones that don't look or talk like us. Be like the mama sheep, and bring encouragement to them. But most importantly, tell them about Jesus. You'll ***see life come from it—life, life, and more life.***

I'm a city-boy: I know very little about livestock, and the only shepherding I know about is within a church. But I do know about being a sheep: wandering away, feeling lost, then finding the Shepherd who led me from sin and death into life. Come, follow the Shepherd. Listen to his voice. Find green pastures and still waters - Find life.