

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 3, 2009
Fourth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 4:23-37
Psalm 100
I John 3:1-8
John 10:11-16

Today is also known as “Good Shepherd” Sunday in the church year, because some of our texts focus on the image of the shepherd, and on God’s shepherding role in our lives.

The picture we see in Psalm 100, John 10, and numerous other passages like Psalm 23 and Isaiah 40, is a picture of a shepherd gently leading his sheep, and it evokes romantic images of God’s leading and direction in our own lives.

As nice as these images are, they have also been the source of much frustration and even anger for me, especially at times where I have struggled to discern God’s specific will and direction for my life.

I know that Psalm 23 talks of the shepherd restoring the soul, making us lie down by quiet waters, and leading us in paths of righteousness for his Name’s sake. But I stopped counting long ago the number of times in my life where I’ve said, “if the Good Shepherd is leading me, then why do I feel like I don’t have a clue where I’m going?”

A week or so ago the Tea and Tomes group was discussing the book *The Shack* at the home of Lloyd and Nancy. You may recall that the protagonist in the book receives a note from God in his mailbox. At one point in the discussion I was intrigued when Nancy spoke up and recalled a time in her life where she said, “I wish God would put a note in *my* mailbox, because I want to do what God wants, but it’s hard to know what that is.”

I went home that night thinking to myself, “boy, do I second that emotion!”

Wouldn’t it be nice to have God tell us directly what to do regarding specific and important decisions in our lives? Wouldn’t it be terrific to wake up in the morning, trundle out to your mailbox, and find a note that said:

- * Pursue *this* job or vocation
- * Marry *that* person
- * Live in *that* city or country
- * Pursue *this* opportunity

I cannot tell you how many times in my life that I have looked up to heaven, exasperated, and said: “God, please just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it...”

But I’ve yet to find a note in my mailbox.

Reading the texts this week got me to thinking that maybe the problem is not with God as much as it is with me, and *how* I think of God’s leading in my life. The image of the shepherd and the sheep really set me to thinking about this. Just prior to our text in John’s Gospel, Jesus says these words:

The true shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out [of the fold]. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they recognize his voice. (Jn. 10:3-5)

Customarily, when I think about God's leading in my life, I typically think about Jesus (like the shepherd) leading me by being *out in front* of me, and calling on me to follow.

But I learned this week that this is not the only way that shepherds lead their flocks. Dr. Laura Mendenhall tells a story of her experience living in West Texas, and of a friend of hers who is a rancher and a real shepherd. His name is Tom.

Speaking of her friend, the shepherd, she says:

Tom treats his sheep like family. Tom does not usually shout to his sheep about anything. Sometimes he sings to them. They follow him, not because of his authoritative directions, but because they trust his voice. Tom is not usually out in front of them, but rather behind them. (Lectionary Homiletics 20:3, 2009, p. 38)

Dr. Mendenhall then continues:

We may sometimes be frustrated when we are unable to see Jesus. But most of the time, Jesus is leading from behind, picking us up when we get into trouble, encouraging us to go ahead and trust what we know. We are just as vulnerable as the sheep, and Jesus leads us through our challenges [from behind]. (See above, p. 39)

As I read these words, the proverbial "light" went on for me, and I had a little epiphany. I thought about how I often struggle with God's leading in my life because I want Jesus to be *out ahead* of me. I want direct input about specific decisions I need to make. I want a note in the mailbox every morning.

But God often has something else in mind. Jesus often chooses to lead me *from behind*. The proper path for my life is found not in having him dictate to me specific answers to specific questions, but in cultivating a *relationship* with him and learning to hear his voice. The entire context of John 10 makes this clear, as does real life shepherding.

E.g., in ancient Palestine, when night came, shepherds would often need to construct makeshift sheepfolds based on the materials they had available to them where they were. They often looked for rock formations that formed an enclosure, but often they had to take bushes and brush and pile them up in a sort of “U” shape. Then they would take thorny bushes and pile them on the top of the enclosure to prevent the sheep from trying to jump out, and to make it harder for thieves to jump over the wall to steal them.

Once the enclosure was constructed, the only way in and out of the fold was through a space the shepherd would leave open. Once the sheep were in, the shepherd would literally lie across the opening, becoming the “door” or the “gate” in and out of the sheep fold.

At night, many flocks would often come together and share the same fold for the night. In the morning, each shepherd would then take a position and begin calling his sheep out of the fold. The sheep would respond not so much to the words, *but to the distinct tone of their shepherd’s voice*.

In our human nature, we so often want Jesus to lead us and guide us by taking the lead, by being *out ahead of* us and saying, “come here, go there, do this, do that.”

But God often says “no” to that. It is sometimes necessary for Jesus to lead us *from behind*, to allow us a measure of freedom to explore, to think, to choose, even to make mistakes. For Jesus is concerned not just with individual choices we make, but with our desire to hear his voice amidst the clamor of so many other voices that would call to us.

As far as Jesus is concerned, it’s the relationship that’s critical. Individual choices are borne from the relationship. Jesus leads us and guides us and shepherds us from the heart of this relationship where he not only knows our names, but where he lays down his life for us.

Just prior to our Gospel text, Jesus says: “the thief comes to steal, to kill, to destroy. I have come that you might have life in all of its fullness.” It is also translated, “I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly.”

Jesus may sometimes lead and shepherd us *from behind*. But make no mistake. He *is* leading us. And to any and all forces of evil or destruction that would come against us, Jesus has this to say: “Over my dead body.”

As we prepare to come to the Lord's table this morning, the bread and the wine are tangible reminders to us that Jesus is our guide, our guardian, our Shepherd. And they remind us that all of our individual decisions in life are best made not when we look for a note in the mailbox, but when we listen closely for the sound of a voice. The voice that sometimes gently calls our name. The voice that sometimes sings a song to our soul. But always the voice that tells us we are loved beyond measure.

Oh, for grace to hear that voice, for the *desire* to hear that voice, and for courage to follow where it leads.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.