

“SHOW ME A SIGN: II – A SHEPHERD’S STAFF”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

January 21, 2018

Psalm 23

John 10:11-15

For nine years, from 2002 through 2011, there was an obnoxious, but very effective ad campaign for Verizon that had a tagline that went like this – “Can you hear me now?” You all heard it a million times, didn’t you? And even today, when you’re on your cell phone and want to make sure the person on the other end is getting what you’re saying, you laugh when you ask “Can you hear me now?” Right?

Well, Verizon was out to prove back then that their reception was better than any of their competitors, their equipment was better, the clarity of their calls was superior. And I dare say, their campaign was effective, if years later we’re still quoting it!

This morning, I want to put a little twist on that slogan by suggesting that these days we might wish we didn’t hear so many people so well – because we’re getting hammered on every side by people talking to us, in one form or another. Most of us have phones – some more than one. We have home phones, and then cell phones or smart phones. We also have computers, which brings in another form of people getting to us – email. I don’t know about you, but I have four different email accounts – one personal and three church related. Add to the list social media – Facebook, Instagram and the like – even more voices calling out to us.

What else? Our schedules call us, family and friends call out to us, society calls us, the news call us – it never ends. Voices, voices, voices calling out to us, calling us to listen, and in many cases, calling us to follow them.

What’s a person to do with so many forces, so many voices calling for your attention? What’s a person to do, where’s a person to go, when so many people and things compete for your attention?

Well, my friends, I have good news this morning, because the answer can be found in both of our scripture lessons today – Psalm 23 and John 10, the “Good Shepherd” passage. Within those lessons is the answer to our question, “to whom should I listen? – and the answer is the Lord.

In fact, for Jesus himself, the answer was found in Psalm 23. That was his scripture after all – the Hebrew scriptures. He likely prayed those very words,

having learned them in the synagogue as a young child. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . he maketh me to lie down . . . he leadeth me . . . he restoreth me.” Reciting those words, Jesus let everyone around him know the One to whom he listened, the One in whom he trusted, the One who gave him all that he would ever need, the One who was always there for him – God himself.

Then we turn to the passage from the Gospel of John and find in Jesus what he found in his heavenly father – the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd who knows us like no other, who loves us like no other, who knows and wants what’s best for us, and will do all he can, including laying down his life for us, that we might have life – real life, true life, abundant life, eternal life.

With all the voices calling out to us, his is the one to which we need to listen the most – the voice of the Good Shepherd.

You know, as I was doing research for this sermon, I ran into a problem, and maybe somebody here can help straighten me out. I read two different sources about shepherds, each one talking authoritatively about them, and they were diametrically opposed to each other. Let me explain.

First, I read a sermon by the great Barbara Brown Taylor in which she talked about a friend of hers who was a shepherd, and taught her all about shepherding. This is what she wrote: “Cows are herded from the rear with shouts and prods from the cowboys. But that does not work with sheep. If you stand behind sheep making noises, they will just run around behind you. They actually prefer to be led. Cows can be pushed, sheep must be led. Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else – their trusted shepherd – does not go first, to show them that everything is all right.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Voice of the Shepherd”)

Well, there you go. Until I turned to another sermon, where the preacher, Dr. Laura Mendenhall, also spoke of a friend of hers named Tom who was a shepherd, and she wrote this: “In order to encourage the sheep to move on to other pastures, Tom cannot go charging out in front of the sheep shouting orders to them, ‘Here, sheep, sheep, sheep, come this way. Follow me, sheep, turn here.’ If Tom were to try to direct his sheep in this way, they would probably just turn and go in the opposite direction.”

And she goes on to say that “The truth is that the sheep seldom see Tom’s face for Tom is not usually out in front of them but rather behind them.” (On-line, The Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall, “Led From Behind”)

So there you go! One person assures us that sheep must be led, and the other that they must be pushed from behind. Well, at that point, after having read both

of those sermons, I was totally perplexed, until I decided it really didn't matter to me, because truth be told, I think Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will lead us however we need to be led whenever we need to be led.

Because sometimes you and I need to be called forth to go in a new direction. Sometimes Jesus goes ahead of us and calls us to "Come this way!" We know it, we feel it in that stirring in our head or heart, that racing of our pulse when we feel we should do something.

I've felt that over and over again in my life – in big and small ways. Certainly when I felt the call to ministry – that was Jesus calling to me, inviting me to join him in a new adventure. That was big. But he calls me in smaller ways all the time. Let me just tell you about one that happened the other day. It was last Monday morning, in fact.

As you all know, last weekend I was down in Ocean City with 78 other women on the Women's Retreat, and when I got home on Sunday night, I was exhausted – not just because of dealing with everything on the retreat, but because for several weeks up to that point, I was up late every night working on things. So I went to the retreat tired, and came home exhausted.

Well, on Monday morning – early Monday morning, 8 am – I was supposed to be going to the Martin Luther King Jr. celebration at Wrights AME Church. Now, let me say that I've been in Elkton a long time now, and I think over all the years, I have missed one of those services, and it was because I was sick. So all of that was going through my mind, as I laid in bed and pondered staying home. I was just too tired, and anyway, would anyone really miss me?

I was seconds away from making the decision to stay in bed and skip it, when something tugged at my heart – well, make that, someone. It was indeed, the Good Shepherd, who prompted me to get up and go, and am I ever glad that I did, because I heard one of the most powerful and most effectively preached sermons I have ever heard in my entire life (and those of you who were there with me can attest to that). That man gave us a clinic on how to preach a good sermon. It was powerful and moving and contained within it images that I shall never forget – and I came within seconds of making a decision where I would have ended up missing it.

So yes, Barbara Brown Taylor, shepherds do lead us from in front of us. But I also know that shepherds have to push us at times, and surely, our Good Shepherd does as well. The great evangelist Dwight Moody said that a Scottish preacher once told him "how, in the highlands of Scotland, a sheep would often wander off into the rocks and get into places they couldn't get out of. The grass on these mountains is very sweet and the sheep like it, and they would jump down 10 or 12 feet, and then they can't jump back up again, and the shepherd hears them

bleating in distress. They may be there for days, until they have eaten all the grass. The shepherd will wait until they are so faint they cannot stand, and then they will put a rope around him, and he will go over and pull that sheep up out of the jaws of death.” Moody asked the man why they didn’t go down there when the sheep first gets stuck, and he replied, “Oh, they are so foolish they would dash right over the precipice and be killed if they did.” Thinking on that, Moody concluded that “that is the way with people. They won’t go back to God til they have no friends and have lost everything. If you are a wanderer, I tell you that the Good Shepherd will bring you back the moment you have given up trying to save yourself and are willing to let Him save you in His own way.” (On-line, Sermonillustrations.com, “Sheep”)

So, you see what I mean – sometimes shepherds do push you from behind too. Sometimes we need to be led, and sometimes we need to be pushed. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, knows us so well, that he knows what we need and when we need it, and offers it to us, if we’ll only let him.

Will you? Will you listen for his voice calling in your head, your ears, your heart? He knows you like no other, he loves you like no other, he wants what’s best for you.

Wherever you are in your life today, whether you’re feeling strong and secure, or whether you’re feeling overwhelmed and unsure, know this – you have a guide for your journey through life – and his name is Jesus, the Good Shepherd. You need only turn to him and he will walk with you every step of the way, and even carry you when you can’t carry yourself.

One day, two men were led into a large classroom to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. One was a published orator trained in speech technique and drama. He repeated the psalm in a powerful way. When he was finished, the audience leapt to their feet and cheered and even asked for an encore that they might hear his wonderful voice again. Then the other man, who was much older, repeated the same words – “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .” But when he finished, no sound came from the large class – simply silence. They sat there in a deep mood of devotion and prayer. Then, the first man, the orator, stood to his feet. “I have a confession to make,” he said. “The difference between what you have just heard from my old friend, and what you heard from me is this: I know the Psalm, my friend knows the Shepherd.” (On-line, “The Sermon Notebook”)

Friends, do you just know the words of the psalm, or do you know the Shepherd – the Good Shepherd – Jesus the Christ? He knows you, and waits to hold your hand and your heart and lead you all the days of your life. He loves you so much that he died for you. Will you love him so much that you will live for him? Will you love him so much that you will let him guide all your days?

Join me in prayer, will you, as we pray slowly and thoughtfully, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul.  
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil.  
For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.  
Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.