

The story is told of a pastor who joined a Kiwanis club. Not long after, the club's membership secretary spoke to him. *"I have a problem,"* the man said. *"It is the rule of the club to have only one representative from each profession. We already have someone listed as a pastor. But I do have a vacancy for hog-caller. Could I list you that way?"* The pastor said, *"Well, usually I have been called a shepherd. But you know your people best."*

Hog-callers don't find a noteworthy place in the Bible. But in ancient Israel, shepherds were an important part of the economic scene, the social scene, and the religious scene. Adam's son, Abel, was a shepherd. Abraham was a shepherd. So were Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David. But the most important shepherd spoken about in scripture is God Himself.

In Ezekiel, for instance, the prophet tells us God says *"I will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they scatter."* Jeremiah wrote *"He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock."* And Isaiah promised that *"like a shepherd, God will tend His flock."* For this reason, King David (a former shepherd himself) used this image to tell us of God's care by writing *"the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."*

Unfortunately, we are not very familiar with the images of shepherds and sheep. In fact, the closest most of us have come to sheep is seeing them on a farm, in a petting zoo, or at a Live Nativity. Yet even if we did have more encounters with sheep, our experience would be different from people in ancient Israel. Sheep today are fenced in; the sheep in ancient Israel were not. The grazing lands in ancient Israel were unowned ranges; sheep around us graze on fenced in private farms. And the land on which the sheep graze is completely different, with the ground in ancient Israel being more like the parched Southwest corner of our nation than a local Bucks County farm that looks like it was crafted by Lawn Doctor.

To give us a better picture of sheep in ancient Israel, H.V. Morton wrote about a shepherd who descended *"into a valley with his flock, [going] down a slope, and up the other side to the next ridge. Raising his voice, the shepherd called the sheep [to follow.] Several returned his call by bleating, and some looked in his direction, but none moved. So he called out again. One sheep, who had a bell around its neck, stopped eating, and plunged into the valley and up the other side to the shepherd. The shepherd, with this one bell-wearing sheep, walked on. After a time, the rest of the sheep looked for the shepherd and the sheep with the bell. And not seeing them, they began to panic. Then, they heard the voice of the shepherd and the sound of the bell from over the next ridge, and raced into the ravine and up the other side to find the shepherd waiting."*

Last week we heard the 23rd psalm tell us *"the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."* That psalm is more than just great poetry however. In calling us sheep, God is telling us something important about ourselves. That is because like sheep, we lose sight of God. Like sheep, we only pay attention to our own selfish desires. And like sheep, we have to listen for the ring of the bellwether's bell and the voice of the Good Shepherd to keep from getting lost.

But we don't like being called sheep. That is because being a sheep means we cannot make the important decisions of life on our own. Being sheep means we don't know what is best for us, or what is dangerous. Being sheep means we need the guidance of a Good Shepherd. And we would rather be our own shepherd - or at least the bellwether, or even maybe the sheepdog - barking out orders to other people about how they should live.

But despite what we WANT to believe about ourselves, God says we are dependent on Him to live in the ways we were created to live. He says it is only when we follow His voice (and the bellwether of the Church's bell) that we can travel in the "*paths of righteousness*." And He says the only way we will "*fear no evil*" and have our "*cup overflow*" in the "*presence of our enemies*" is if we live by His leading, guidance, and power. We see this illustrated in an incident in Maine. Years ago, a newspaper there ran two pictures on the front page. One was a flock of sheep. The other was the newly elected town council. But the captions got reversed. Under the photo of the sheep, the caption identified them as the new town council. And under the photo of the newly elected town council, the caption said "*here they are - naive and vulnerable, they huddle together against the uncertainty of the outside world.*"

There was more truth in that mistake than we may want to admit. That is the bad news. In the terminology used in Disciple Bible study, it is our "*human condition*," the situation we are in when we live only in human strength and not in the power of the Holy Spirit (trusting in God, depending on God, and allowing God to live in and through us). But the good news of the gospel is that we can learn how to trust in God. The good news of the gospel is that we can learn how to follow God's leading. The good news of the gospel is that we can learn how to let God to live in us and through us. To do that, however, we have to respond to what Jesus says in chapter 10 of John's gospel. That is because in this passage, the Good Shepherd tells us several things.

First, Jesus tells us He will never forsake us. This is because "*we are His people and the sheep of His pasture*," as it says in Psalm 100. Second, Jesus tells us His love is sacrificial, for "*the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*" Third, Jesus tells us that being in relationship with Him means we must obey His voice, submit to His leading, and repent when we do not, for as Isaiah says "*all of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us have turned to his own way*," and it is only by repenting of our waywardness that we can be made faithful.

Those three things then call us to live in a certain way as a response; they call us to live as lambs of God. For anything less than living according to the lamb-like ways God lays out in scripture is to make the choice to be a prodigal sheep. Which has happened all too many times over the last 2,000 years. Time and again God's flock has been divided, biting one another and harming one another. Time and again God's flock has wandered off, acting like it knew the way on its own. Time and again God's flock in one pen has acted like it was the only one the Good Shepherd owned, even though He said He has sheep in other pens. But, as I noted in speaking about the 23rd psalm last week, this is not the only way we can choose to live. We can choose to live as God's holy and righteous lambs. We don't have to be prodigal sheep.

And there is good reason to choose to live as God's lambs and not as prodigal sheep. That is because if we choose to live according to the ways God calls us to live, Jesus promises that great things will happen in our lives. He promises that great things will happen in the lives of those around us. And He promises that great things will happen in the our world. He promises, for instance, that we will find unity in the midst of our differences. He promises that we will know the way to go to not get lost. And He has promises that we will be enabled to witness to His love in such power that no sheep will be left outside the gate. But we must choose to live that way.

It does not happen automatically. The desire to be holy and righteous does not just rise up in us and make us follow God. We must choose to be lambs of God. That is because the desire to be a prodigal sheep often rises up in our heart instead. It is because the temptation to go our own way pops up again and again. And it is because the ways of this world war again the ways of the One True Lamb of God. Which is why Ezekiel wrote to the lambs of God who so easily become prodigal sheep to declare that *"this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?'"*

That is because while the Good Shepherd has always been perfectly good toward *"the people of his pasture, the flock under his care,"* all too often we humans have been tempted to not be so good toward our fellow sheep. We have been tempted to be selfish lambs instead. And we have been tempted to just take care of ourselves rather than try to bring more sheep into the fold. As a result, God's sheep pen (the Church) has all too often become filled with prodigal sheep - lambs who want salvation but do not really live like they are the lambs of God.

For that reason, the delegates of the Eastern PA Conference recently met to think about Romans 13:11. That verse says *"you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep."* And that verse was then used to say that in response to all the issues difficult swirling around us in 2022 (a pandemic, ongoing poverty, unrelenting injustice, and repeated acts of racial violence) it is time for the lambs of God, the Church, to *"wake from sleep"* to be the flock God calls us to be. This means that today is the day to answer the question: *"Are you a lamb of God or are you a prodigal sheep?"*

If you want to be a lamb of God, you need to DO certain things, not just WANT to do certain things. You need to pray. You need to read your Bible. And you need prayerfully listen for what God is calling you to do as His lamb as you read. For the God speaks to us through the Bible to tell us what He wants us to DO. He speaks to us from the Bible to tell us how He wants what we DO to help us follow Him. And He speaks to us from the Bible to tell us about the other sheep to whom He wants us to be the bellwether to leads them into His fold.

If that is the kind of lamb you want to be, rather be a prodigal sheep, then it needs to be something you seek to be - in the power of the Spirit - each day. This means that in addition to praying and reading your Bible (which is how you spiritually feed yourself as a lamb of God), you need to be involved in acts of mission and ministry. This means participating with others when God's flock

gathers for fellowship. It means faithfully using your time, talent, and treasure in the work of God's flock, the Church, to help Him bring more lambs into the fold. And it means saying "*Here, I am, send me,*" when you hear announcements about the ways our flock is trying to share the love of Christ with those who have not yet chosen to walk with Jesus.

For instance, at this very moment we are inviting people to be involved in a number of ways to share God's love with others (as we say in our mission statement):

- You can work in the Giving Garden so we can give fresh vegetables to families in need
- You can work in our Blessings Ministry to give food to families in need
- You can work in our video ministry to help those worshipping with us online
- You can work in Vacation Bible School to help us tell children about the Good Shepherd

And that is just to name a few of the things that the Christ UMC flock is trying to do to share Christ's love with others. Each month new opportunities arise, new mission partners are spoken about, and new events happen that call us to respond as "*the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.*" So what will it be? Jesus rose from the dead to offer you new life. Jesus sent His Spirit into the world to give you the power you need to be His lamb. And Jesus calls you THIS VERY DAY to do something to help bring new lambs into His fold. So, Jesus asks you "*Will you be My lamb? Or will you be a prodigal sheep?*" How will you answer?