

May 3, 2009 “The Good Shepherd” Easter 4/John 10:11-18

John tells a story about sheep and a shepherd. Many of us these days might not even know what a sheep smells like and have never seen a shepherd.

So I want to tell you about Tom, a real shepherd. Tom herds sheep in West Texas and has a dog named Shep and everyday Tom and Shep are with the sheep. Every day. Tom does not take time off from his sheep to go out to dinner or to a movie. I don't think Tom even leaves the sheep to go to church. Maybe he holds his own services for the sheep. I don't know. What I do know is that he stays with his sheep. Tom's father bought these sheep years ago and Tom treats them like family, seeming to enjoy their company. Once somebody told Tom that God created sheep in order to make chickens look smart, but Tom did not laugh.

While he knows that sheep are not smart enough for a game of fetch or frisbee toss; nevertheless, sheep can generally figure out where food and water are. That's pretty smart. On the other hand, if Tom does not keep them moving, the sheep will overgraze a place, so Tom and Shep stay with the sheep everyday leading them to green pastures.

In order to encourage the sheep not to overgraze but 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. Therefore, Tom does not usually shout to his sheep about anything. Sometimes Tom talks out loud to himself and the sheep probably overhear. Sometimes he may speak to them in the same way we speak to babies never really expecting them to understand. And sometimes he sings to them because he likes to sing and because the sheep do not seem to be disturbed by his singing, but I have never heard Tom raise his voice to his sheep, never heard him be angry or disparaging about his sheep. And so, they follow him, not because of his authoritative directions, but because they trust his voice. While his sheep could probably not distinguish Tom's face from that of any other shepherd, that does not mean that they are stupid. The truth is they seldom see Tom's face for Tom is not usually out in front of them but rather behind them.

They know Tom's voice and are reassured as he sings along behind them-encouraging those who are straggling, assisting those who are injured or

sick, directing those who cannot find food, helping the unfortunate, the tired, the lame. Sheep have good instincts and with a good shepherd are able to manage very well. But they need someone to watch over them and lead them to green pastures. They have learned to trust their shepherd for Tom is with them everyday and they know his voice as he leads them often from behind.

I doubt seriously, however, that the sheep are aware of how Tom works to keep them from danger. Tom transforms the wilderness into security and safety for them, guiding them around danger to green grass and cool water. Tom will not permit the wolves and coyotes of the hill country to be a threat to his sheep. He defends them from predators. Tom is always on the lookout because sheep are such vulnerable creatures. Of course, on occasion when Tom has been ill or had a family emergency, he has had to hire someone to look after the sheep. But hired hands want time off and at the slightest danger, hired hands will abandon the sheep and run. A shepherd, on the other hand, will put his own life at risk in order to protect his sheep. Tom has, in fact, sustained wounds from wild animals he has had to fight off his sheep. And the sheep seem to know that the hired hands value their own safety more than the lives of the sheep. Tom has noticed that the sheep are often jumpy when he brings in a hired hand. They know the difference between a shepherd and a hired hand. That is why Tom seldom trusts the sheep to a hired hand. That is why, day after day, over rocks and crevices, through shadows and storms, Tom is with the sheep. They know his voice and Tom leads them though, most of the time, it is from behind.

The Bible tells us that the Lord is our Shepherd, which makes me wonder--is Jesus like Tom? Does Jesus seldom get a haircut and bathe only weekly? I don't know about that. I hope it means that Jesus refuses to laugh when the angels tell jokes about how stupid we are. I hope it means that Jesus does not wring his hands over us but is content to be with us even though we regularly do stupid things. I know that like a shepherd Jesus picks us up when we fall down, mends our broken spirits, feeds our famished lives, supports us when we are limping along, sings to comfort our spirits. I know that like a shepherd Jesus does not leave us.

Of course, if we look for Jesus to be out in front of us showing us the way, we may be frustrated at not being able to see him. It may be, however, that Jesus is leading us from behind, the way Tom leads the sheep. Maybe it is because Jesus is a shepherd that he does not shout directions to us. Jesus knows what we can do and wants to encourage us to go ahead and act on

our good judgment. Sometimes we may wish Jesus would be out in front of us giving us explicit signals. We wish Jesus would be that direct with us. We would rather not have to think for ourselves. We would prefer to have Jesus to make decisions for us so that we might have someone to blame when things go wrong. 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. While, like a shepherd, Jesus may be behind us, he is always there just like a shepherd.

For we are as vulnerable as the sheep and just as oblivious to the dangers surrounding us. Like the sheep, we, too, live in a wilderness, yet the life we know is abundant because of Jesus' love for us. So many times we put ourselves in the way of danger, and yet Jesus leads us through it so that we are hardly aware of what lurks around us. We wander through life as though we were indestructible when in truth we are not. We live as stupidly as the sheep, overextending our resources without paying any attention to what we are doing. And all the while, Jesus moves us gently along protecting us from ourselves as well as danger, and we are often oblivious to Christ's presence with us. For, like the shepherd, Jesus leads us from behind, making sure that no one is left along the way, carrying us until we can continue on our own. Therefore, like the sheep, we may not often see Jesus' face, but we know his voice of comfort and encouragement. For Jesus leads us from behind and invites us to do the same for others.

For we are not the hired hands. We are the ones who have been loved by the Good Shepherd and cared for all the day long. We have been watched over, provided for, carried through rough times. Jesus has stayed with us through the valley of the shadow of death. We are the beloved, those for whom Jesus laid down his life. And Jesus invites those who have been so loved to shepherd others, to love as we have been loved, not in word and speech, but in truth and action. We are called to those who are vulnerable, those who do stupid things, those who are stragglers, those who are hurt, any who need help. We are called to stay with them, to carry them, to encourage them on their way. We are called to be their shepherd and not to be in their face shouting directions to them. Doubtless, if that is what we did, they would turn and run the other way.

But if we lead from behind, nurturing and supporting, caring for them as God has cared for us, if we work for their safety and security, if we do not refuse to help, but support them in using their own best instincts, we honor the One who is our Good Shepherd, we honor the One who leads us

beside still waters and restores our soul, the One who leads us on right paths, the One whose rod and staff comfort us so that we fear no evil, the One who prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies, the One who anoints us so that our cup overflows. The Lord is our Shepherd and invites us to shepherd others in order that goodness and mercy might follow us all the days of our life so that we all might dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Thanks be to God.