

The Lord Is My Shepherd
 (or, “Who Is the Person Whom You
 Trust the Most in the World?”)
 John 10:1-15 (NRSV)
 April 13, 2008, 4th Sunday of Easter
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA-Rock Hill
 James T. Richardson

JOHN 10:1-15; NRSV)

[Note: The gospel-writer John remembers Jesus healing a man blind from birth. After this, the Pharisees question the man, do not believe him, and then kick him out of their midst. Jesus then seeks out the man, and while in conversation with him, some of the Pharisees began questioning Jesus. Today’s passage is a part of the discussion. Jesus is speaking.]

- 1 *“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.*
- 2 *The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.*
- 3 *The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*
- 4 *When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.*
- 5 *They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”*
- 6 *Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*
- 7 *So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.*
- 8 *All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.*
- 9 *I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.*
- 10 *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*
- 11 *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*
- 12 *The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away---and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.*
- 13 *The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.*
- 14 *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,*
- 15 *just as the father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.*

Twenty years ago, back in the summer of 1988, the Richardson family swapped jobs and houses with the Iain Paton family in Glasgow, Scotland. I served as the Pastor of a church in Glasgow. One of the experiences we had was watching sheep dog trials in a setting similar to what I would call a county fair. It was amazing to watch sheep dogs at work with a herd of sheep.

There is one Charles Schulz PEANUTS cartoon which shows Snoopy the Dog

barking and nipping at the heels of Linus Van Pelt, and barking and nipping at the heels of Violet and Sally Brown, and barking and nipping at the heels of Schroeder and Charlie Brown, and barking and nipping at the heels of Lucy Van Pelt and Pig Pen.

The final frame shows all of the kids huddled together in the middle of the yard, and a very satisfied Snoopy standing off to the side, commenting to us readers:

“I would have made a very good shepherd!”

In 21st century America, the concept of the shepherd is not one with which most of us are very familiar. It would have been better if Jesus had spoken of himself as a good professor or as a good basketball coach.

However, having said that, Sunday is here and the text is before us: it is Jesus saying: **“I am the good shepherd.”**

In the time and place in which Jesus lived, the shepherd was a rich symbol in the religious lives of the Hebrew people. I do not know what is your present concept of the highest vocational calling available to a person today, but if you lived in ancient Israel, it would have been the shepherd. The topography of the land and the economics of the day made the shepherd the backbone of the economy of the nation of Israel. If you were to have asked the man on the street to tell you the most important man in the nation, vocationally, the answer would have been: THE SHEPHERD!

And the religion of the Hebrews reflected it. What was the Lord God, Yahweh, like? The shepherd. One of the Psalmists wrote:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want;
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters;
He restores my soul... (Psalm 23:1-3)*

Years later, concerning the One whom God would send, the prophet Isaiah wrote:

*He shall feed his flock like a shepherd:
He shall gather the lambs with his arm,
and carry them in his bosom, and shall
gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40:11)*

And so, in the fullness of time, God chose to become a human being in Jesus of Nazareth, and we hear him saying: **“I am the good shepherd...”**

As I studied for this sermon, I read a number of commentaries that made an attempt to say something about shepherds and particularly the Israelite concept of the shepherd and his work:

his protecting the sheep,
his feeding and watering the sheep,
his loving the sheep.

And they also tried to say something about how the sheep know their shepherd completely:

they know his whistle, and
they know his voice, and
they know the way that he walks.

Now, listen to this: As I tried again and again to understand what possibly this could have to say to American Christians in the 21st century, I returned again and again to the word **TRUST.....T-R-U-S-T.**

The relationship between the shepherd and the sheep was one of **trust.**

I know very little about an automobile. And so, as I have lived in different cities through the years, I have needed to get a mechanic to service my car; and the question that I first ask about a mechanic is: **CAN I TRUST HIM?**

When I have needed medical attention for some illness or disease, I have placed myself under the care of a physician to follow his orders completely, only after I have satisfied myself with the answer to my question: **CAN I TRUST HIM?**

There have been occasions when I have wanted and needed to share my deepest feelings and fears and thoughts with another person, but I have never done so until I have satisfied myself with the answer to my question: **CAN I TRUST HIM?**

I taught swimming and life saving for eight years, and in the program for which I worked we began teaching children at four years of age, and we taught all ages of both children and adults. One of the things that I have observed about people, where there is fear involved with the water and swimming, is that the most important thing to the person being taught, whether a 4 year old or a 40 year old, is the relationship to the teacher and the question: **CAN I TRUST HIM?**

In today's passage, Jesus said: **I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD.**

What Jesus was saying was: YOU CAN TRUST ME!

He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. **I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD.** [John 10:12-14a] **YOU CAN TRUST ME!**

And isn't that one thing that **parenthood** in all of its best attributes should emphasize: TRUST?

TRUST is what makes a four month old baby smile and look deeply into his mother's eyes as he sucks from her breast.

TRUST is what makes a two year old come running into her father's arms when she is tired and hungry and scared.

TRUST is what makes a child who is ashamed and heart-broken come home from school and tell his parents what has happened.

TRUST is what makes a young girl just going through puberty understand the words coming from the lips of her mother.

TRUST is what makes your twenty year old daughter want to come home to wrestle with the question of what all is involved in abortion.

Jesus said: I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD. (You can trust me!) And he went further. Jesus said: THE GOOD SHEPHERD LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE SHEEP.

The comparison that Jesus was making was clearly understood by all of the Jews who were listening to him. For the shepherd out in the pastures of Israel was responsible for his sheep, and when danger approached in the form of a wolf or a thief, the shepherd would protect the flock or would die in the attempt.

Is it any wonder that the people so easily understood the Psalmist when he wrote: **“Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”**

And yet, the real meat of Jesus’ statement is so much deeper than the surface comparison. For, Jesus was talking about himself and his own death as the way that people could come to know God.

The Christian faith teaches us that God became a human being in Jesus Christ in order that we might see what God is like. The Bible says that God **“...became flesh and dwelt among us...”** [John 1:14]. God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth and showed us what a perfect human being should be and do.

And further, by the death of Jesus on the cross and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, God has overcome EVIL and SIN and DEATH!

And we don’t have to be afraid.

That is what the Christian faith and the church are all about:

we no longer have to fear anything...even DEATH itself!

The Apostle Paul put it this way:

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? ...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 8:31, 35, 37-39)

So, what does all of this have to say to us here at Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church here in Rock Hill, South Carolina?

It says that if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

It says that if you want to know what God is like, look at a good shepherd.

It says that if you want to know what God is like, look at a good parent.

It is 2:00 o'clock in the morning, it is pitch-black night, and the child awakens with a fever of 103° and is in pain and is frightened, but is calmed and reassured by the cooling hand of her mother on her forehead.

That is what God is like!

Or, the teen-ager's pain has been found to be caused by malfunctioning kidneys and the physicians have said that unless a replacement for the kidney is found, the teen-ager will die; and so the kidney donor turns out to be the teen-ager's father.

That is what God is like!

Or, the young woman's graduation gown, worn so proudly and showing the stripes of the Doctor of Philosophy Degree so recently received, does not show the sacrificial love of the mother who has worked two eight-hour shifts a day, scrubbing floors and never having known the dignity of being called anything other than her first name, Annie Mae.

That is what God is like!

Jesus said: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

CAN I TRUST HIM?.....you wonder...YES, YOU CAN TRUST HIM!

And that is good news!