

Sunday May 7th, 2017

Easter III

John 10:1-21

“Who Is Your Shepherd?”

Why do you think that sheep need shepherds? Well, the answer is quite obvious; sheep without a shepherd are prone to stray away from safe pastures and into harm's way. Straying sheep are apt to be attacked by hungry wolves, mountain lions and in rural Ontario, coyotes prey on sheep. While in Toronto, not far from where we used to live coyotes have a taste for dogs and cats. Straying sheep wander into steep canyons, or into areas where there is no food or water and they suffer from hunger or dehydration.

This being said, however, the reason people keep sheep is because they are very valuable. For centuries, people in many parts of the world have kept sheep for their wool, their meat, and in some places even their milk. In some cultures, it was, and still is, sheep that represent currency, and not money. In some parts of the world, a person's wealth is calculated by how many sheep he owns. Therefore, because sheep are valuable and prone to wander, shepherds were needed and shepherding techniques were developed.

Over the centuries, all kinds of ingenious ideas were developed to control sheep; everything from shepherding staffs, fencing methods, sheep dogs and even mixing sheep with goats. In modern farming, one method used to keep sheep from straying, is to place hoof proof grates across areas where the shepherd must access the pasture. Trucks and humans can cross over the rounded pipes laid over a ditch, but sheep are hesitant to try to step over the ditch because they can't get footing on the rounded pipes.

In 2006, however, in Yorkshire England, they discovered that sheep are not as stupid as we might think they are. On one sheep farm that employed these hoof grates, one sheep figured out how to transgress the grate. It simply laid down on the grate, and rolled over it to the other side. Being herding animals, the other sheep simply followed the first sheep's example, and soon there were sheep all over the countryside.

They got into people's gardens, got chased by local dogs and they blocked road ways. The shepherds managed to round up the stray animals, but soon they rolled over the grate again and were on their way to causing more mischief. To the sheep, rolling over the grate, built there for their own protection, must have seemed like a great idea at the time, but the reality is, straying sheep are at risk to all kinds of dangers. (BBC 1-30-06)

As I indicated before, roving wild animals, packs of dogs, cars, unfamiliar terrain: all can harm or kill the straying sheep. Keeping and protecting sheep is a time consuming, and costly endeavor. In John chapter 10, Jesus speaks familiar words to his disciples, reminding them of how costly the work of a shepherd was. Being a shepherd, in Jesus' day, meant literally putting your life on the line, to defend your herd from lions and poachers.

One wonders, even with the enjoyment of wool and mutton, why anyone would even bother with these very needy animals. Why indeed? The answer is that the shepherd loves his or her sheep. They are precious to them.

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It is interesting then that the prophet Isaiah wrote these words, “We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned his own way; and the Lord has laid on him [Jesus or Suffering Servant] the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6)

It would clearly seem that Isaiah is suggesting that we need a shepherd. Do we need a shepherd? Are we prone to behave as sheep do, wandering off away from safety and security? As 1 Peter 2 calls us to follow, in Jesus the Good Shepherd’s steps, we may wonder why? Why would anyone think that intelligent people, such as we, need guidance? We are, are we not, masters of our own destinies?

Beyond tradition and quaint ideas, no one in today’s modern world believes being a Christian makes a better world; do they? Well the Chinese government believes Christianity makes a difference. Yes, I said Chinese government. According to a report from *Open Door Ministry*, the Chinese government had a problem in the county of Lancan Lahu, in Yunnan province.

For many years, the people of that region had led lives of despair and chaos, derived primarily from addiction to opium. One official was quoted as saying, “Their addiction made them weak and sick. Then they would go to one of their pagan “priests,” who required animal sacrifices of such extravagance that the people became poor. And because they were poor, they stole from each other, and law and order deteriorated. It was a vicious cycle that no amount of government propaganda could break.”

The official continued, “We noticed, however, that in some villages in the county, the Lahu were prosperous and peace loving. There was no drug problem, or any stealing or social order problems. Households had a plentiful supply of pigs, oxen, and chickens. So, we commissioned a survey to find out why these villages were different. To our astonishment and embarrassment, we discovered the key factor was that these villages had a majority of Christians.”

In 1998 officials launched a daring experiment, the likes of which would have been unheard of in previous years in China. The government, paying all expenses, sponsored Christians to go into troubled villages and share their faith. They started in the worst effected village, which had 240 people, 107 of which were hopelessly addicted to opium. The villagers were forced to gather together and listen as Christians from other villages gave their testimonies.

A year later in that village, drug use had dropped, people were becoming more prosperous and the crime rate had dropped. It would seem that the Chinese government learned the all-important lesson that we all follow a shepherd. Some shepherds lead us to devastating life choices, but only one leads us to green pastures, restores our souls and walks us through the valley of death.

Even the communist government of China, which promotes Marxist-Leninist ideology, came to realize the value of Christian faith. It is ironic, considering Karl Marx said “Religion is the opiate of the masses”.

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It would seem in Lahu China, the “opiate of the masses” is far more effective conductor of social peace than that derived from poppy fields. The truth the world does not want to admit is that when people follow Christ, the world is a better place.

That is not to say that some terrible things haven’t been done in the name of Christianity, but when people sincerely follow the pure example of the Good Shepherd, hope is close behind. There is of course, some reluctance on our part to follow the Good Shepherd. This is especially true when we read verse 21 of 1 Peter 2 where Peter writes, “This suffering is all part of what God has called you to. Christ, who suffered for you, is your example.”

Excuse me! Suffering is all part of God’s plan for my life! This, my friends, is a bitter pill to swallow and yet it gets worse. Peter goes on to tell us that in following Christ’s example, we are to be patient when being struck by our enemies. We are also to avoid sin, not to deceive anyone, refuse to seek revenge and ultimately leave our case in the hands of God. What Peter is calling us to: is absolute, unflinching and sacrificial commitment to the leadership of our Good Shepherd.

We are to be imitators of our Good Shepherd Jesus, or as Paul the apostle puts it, “Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had.” (Phil. 2:5) The trouble is it is very hard to imitate Jesus when so much of our experience tempts us to imitate something or someone else, namely the worst incarnation of ourselves. I think we can appreciate this little profound prayer I read.

“Lord, please make me the kind of person my dog thinks I am.” Or perhaps we prefer this little prayer, *“Lord, so far so good. I haven’t sworn today, stolen anything, boasted, gotten angry at anyone, or even had any evil thoughts. But now comes the test, and I implore your help. I have to get up and go to work...”* How so very true these prayers are, and how clearly, they reflect the struggle we all face.

We are all sheep that go astray. No matter how good we know life following Christ is, we feel the pull to other pastures. Even worse, is that we take our eyes off the shepherd and we end up following the herd, no matter what terrible destination that behaviour might lead to.

One morning while shepherds were eating breakfast outside the town of Gevas, Turkey, they were surprised to see a lone sheep jump off a nearby cliff and fall to its death. They were stunned, however, when the rest of the nearly 1,500 sheep in the herd followed, each leaping off the same cliff. When it was all over, the local Askam newspaper reported that “450 of the sheep perished in a billowy, white pile.”

The remainder of the sheep were saved, because as the pile grew higher and higher their fall was cushioned. The estimated loss to the families of Gevas tops \$100,000; an extremely significant amount of money in a country where the average person only earns about \$2700 a year.

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“There’s nothing we can do. They’re all wasted,” said Nevzat Bayhan, a member of one of the 26 families whose sheep were grazing together in the herd. (Washingtonpost.com 7-8-05) We may not wish to face it but we are all followers of someone or something. The deciding factor of whom or what we should follow is the destination we are being led too. As Peter indicates, the journey in following Christ as our shepherd may be difficult.

The journey may be challenging: physically, mentally and spiritually. The journey may cost us: money, time, relationship and even our lives. But what matters ultimately is where the journey leads. This is the question that many of us fail to ask, “Where is this all leading? Where is he or she taking us?” I wonder if the sheep were capable of asking and knowing the final result of the jump off the cliff, would they so readily have followed.

There was a series of television commercials that were used for raising funds for the United Way, that raised the point that no child grows up wanting to be a drug addict, or a prostitute, or a street person. The United Way was making the point that no one aspires to a self-destructive life style, but choices we make which seem innocent at the time, or even attractive at the moment, can lead us to death or at least physical or spiritual harm.

Jesus promised that he came to offer life and not just any old life, but life in abundance. And what more abundant life can there be than going on a journey and knowing that it will end in something marvelous. It is like when we go on a holiday to a special place. A place we have spent hours planning and dreaming about visiting. The struggles we experience in the airport, or in the car, are tolerable because we know that at the end we will be sitting on a beach, or racing around an amusement park.

So, the question then must be asked about our lives, “Whose journey are we going on? Who is our tour leader or shepherd? What or who defines the direction and choices in our lives?” Not idle questions, but if you want an abundant life you need to ask them. Let me therefore suggest that we should consider following Christ.

I mean, who other than the Lord of the universe knows what is best for you? Does your spouse know more than Jesus? (Be careful how you answer that.) Do your children know best? How about your boss at work or the teacher at school? How about your parents? Despite those who claim authority over us that they have the best of intentions; they can get it wrong in dictating what your life’s direction should be.

But to keep the peace or to make them happy, we compromise ourselves into making choices according to their wishes and not what is God’s desire for us. And what is God’s desire for us, but to have life and have it in abundance.

A young Indian brave requested a meeting with the chief of his tribe. “Oh, great chief, I understand that you name each child in our tribe,” the brave began. “That is true,” the chief replied. “Great chief, would you explain to me how you choose each name?” the brave continued.

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The chief bowed his head for a moment, and responded, “When news comes to me that a child has been born to our tribe, I bow my head in silent thanksgiving. When I look up, the first sight my eyes behold becomes the name of the child. If I see a deer running by, the child is named Running Deer. If I see snowflakes in the air, the child is named Snow Gently Falling. But tell me, Dying Dog, who do you ask?” Why indeed?

What is going to define you as a person? What name shall you bear? Shall we be defined by the world or defined by Christ? The choice is up to us, but if we allow anyone else other than Christ to define who we are, we risk losing our abundant life to the hazards of the world. Can you live with such a risk, or will you turn now to the shepherd who is the guardian of your soul?