

"He Leadeth Me"

Psalm 23; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

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1862. A year before, the nation's divide over slavery had erupted into the American Civil War. Would the slave-holding Southern states or the states loyal to the Union be victorious? The Emancipation Proclamation, granting freedom to all slaves in territory controlled by the Union, had not yet been issued. The first "modern" war – that is, war in which mass casualties were made possible by the mass production of weapons – had only just begun.

In this uncertainty a recently ordained 28 year-old student was invited to preach at the historic First Baptist Church of Philadelphia. That man, Joseph H. Gilmore, wrote:

"I set out to give the people an exposition of the 23rd Psalm, which I had given before on three or four occasions, but this time I did not get further than the words 'He Leadeth Me.' So greatly impressed was I with the blessedness of divine guidance that I made this my theme."

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Later that evening during a discussion in the home of a church deacon, Gilmore wrote those lines that permit us, in the midst of life's uncertainties, to declare by song and by faith:

*"He leadeth me, O blessed thought,
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me." U.M. Hymnal, #128*

Christians believe the providential leading of the 23rd Psalm is most perfectly expressed in the person of Jesus, who speaks to us today three certainties from John's Gospel that in times of uncertainty allow us to declare, "He Leadeth Me."

The first certainty is that Jesus says *"I am the good shepherd."* (John 10:11) I am the **good** shepherd. The distinction was important for Jesus' listeners then. Shepherds were not high society. The work was most often done by older men or boys – remember that Psalm 23 is attributed to David, who was called to be king as the youngest of Jesse's sons and while still a boy. Worse, shepherds were not always the highest caliber people. They could be *"the hired hand (who) does not care for the sheep."* (10:13) By contrast, Jesus is the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezekiel 34:11 ff) of God as our shepherd. The distinction of Jesus as the good shepherd was important then.

I am the **good** shepherd. The distinction of is important for Jesus' listeners now. We have just completed our adult study based on the Rev. Michael Slaughter's book Made for a Miracle. Rev. Slaughter is the recently retired pastor of the Ginghamburg U.M. Church in Tipp City, Ohio. In response to those Christians who say they come to church to be fed, Rev. Slaughter is fond of saying "My job is not to feed the sheep. My job is to introduce them to the host of the banquet."

That's my job, too. And soon, in this place, it will be Pastor Kristina's job. And by "job" I do not mean being a hireling. I use it in the sense of "the buck stops here;" and because I am a pastor in response to the call of Christ in my life, I mean the sheer joy of proclaiming Christ, crucified and Risen, a living Lord, a very present help in every time of trouble.

Let's be clear. Neither Pastor Kristina nor I are Jesus. No pastor is. But the word "pastor" means "shepherd," and it has been a great privilege to be the best shepherd I could be as I seek to have the mind of Christ, to be "his hands and feet" as the old poem says, and to confess and apologize when I failed.

Let's also be clear that effectiveness as a pastor is not a one-person show. It involves leading a people who want to be

led, who want to grow in grace; who want to serve and love the Lord; and who want to make a difference in the world he came to save. That leadership involves loving and being loved; and aligning the direction of the church around a vision that comes from pastor and people working together.

I hope you are holding the transition process in prayer. I am. My prayer is that in those places where people are saying, to themselves or others, *“Let’s wait, watch, test; and then decide if we will welcome”* our new pastor will be changed to *“We will love our new pastor, expect to be loved by our new pastor, and work together to build Christ’s realm in this place and time.”*

I mentioned this recently and one person shared these sentiments, *“Pastor, I can get excited about the new thing God will do in our new pastor, but I don’t want you to take it as ‘Don’t let the door hit you on your way out.’”* This had not occurred to me and I was grateful for the candor. Loving and respecting your new pastor is not being unloving or disrespectful to me. In fact, it is one of the most loving and respectful things you can do for all of us. I pray that you will. Most of all, let us all keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who leads us because he is the **good** shepherd. That’s the first certainty.

The second certainty from Jesus is *“I know my own and my own know me.”* That can be very comforting or discomfoting depending on one’s point of view. In particular, if Jesus is the good **shepherd**, that makes us the **sheep**. We may have some romantic notions about this, perhaps hearing J.S. Bach’s “Sheep May Safely Graze” (Maestro!) as we picture idyllic New England uplands, rocky terminal moraine poking through a carpet of lush green June field grass. The shepherd stands aloof, a rugged protector of the little woolies who bleat sweetly in the afternoon sun.

This blissful picture doesn't convey the naked neediness revealed when we liken ourselves to sheep, who are known to be...well, pardon me, "dumb." They have to not only be directed to food but distracted from it because they are unable to discern when their stomachs are full. They rely on people and dogs to protect them because they are defenseless. They are contrary. I'll never forget sitting for an hour in the Wyoming high plains, beeping the horn of my 1965 Ford Falcon trying to get the sheep to move that blocked the road. They probably didn't want to move because they lose their direction easily. They are dirty and smelly when not tended.

Most of us rebel at this as a description of us. We're not dumb, after all. Except my car is smarter than I am. I remember once driving on I-95 and hearing this little "ding-ding-ding" sound. Not the "ding" that comes when you warning light for low fuel comes on, but an incessant, yet soft and low, "ding-ding-ding-ding." I thought maybe it was the sound system so I turned that off. It wasn't a seat belt warning because no one else was in the car. Finally, I realized that my turn signal was still on from when I entered the highway. Oh, yeah, I'm smart. Suuurrrre.

Our great need to be known and seen by the Good Shepherd is reflected in a story by Roland Purdue. Writing about the fire bombing of England by Germany in World War II he writes: *"During a night of fire bombing a father and his small son ran from their burning home in the days of the blitz in London. Seeking some form of shelter, the father jumped into a shell hold in the yard and then held up his arms for his son to follow. But the small boy, hearing the father's voice urging him to jump, replied 'But I can't see you.'" The father could see the child outlined against the night sky and the flickering flames and he answered, 'But I can see you. Jump!'"*

The faith by which we live and die is not that we can see, but that we are seen; not that we can know without a doubt, but that we are known by the God who is faithful despite all doubts. The second certainty is Jesus' assurance, *"I know my own and my own know me."*

The final certainty is Jesus' promise *"I lay down my life for my sheep."* "I am the Good Shepherd," "I know my own and my own know me" and, now, "I lay down my life for my sheep." This is where we stand in awe of God's great, unimaginable love for us. Other people may be shepherds but Jesus alone assures us that we will lay down his life and take it up again for us. The Good Shepherd loves us to death! A death that leads to Resurrection, for himself and us.

Church historian Roberta Bondi describes a long battle with depression in her book Memories of God (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 170, 172). On a weekend marking her wedding anniversary and Easter, she was struck by despondency. Sitting idly, unable to work, she began to repeat the phrase from the Roman Catholic Eucharistic prayer for Easter: *"The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole world."* As she repeated the words, she actually heard what she had said and suddenly the weight lifted from her. She writes: *"There was, indeed, something I had missed about Christianity, and now all of a sudden I could see what it was. It was the Resurrection! ...Jesus had not died to show me I must earn my right to be loved. Nor had he been crucified so that I would take onto my own shoulders infinite responsibility for the pain of the world. Jesus had died for the New Creation, for the joy of the resurrection of the whole world."* The final certainty is that Jesus lays down his life for the sheep.

There is an old adage about preaching that says the preacher is to preach for a decision. What decision is God calling you to make because of this message? In addition to the

hope I mentioned about praying for the pastoral transition, my hope is that you will make a decision to receive this gift of truth: that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows us in every fiber of our being; and, knowing all that we are and all that we are not, gives his life in love so that we might be raised to new life with him. My hope is that you will make a decision to believe it, and live and die by this truth, and let your heart sing with the possibilities it offers and the assurance it gives us:

“He leadeth me, he leadeth me, by his own hand he leadeth me; his faithful follower I would be, for by his hand he leadeth me.”