



October 1, 2017 Sermon – “Shepherd-less Sheep” - Rev. Diane Ellis

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Jesus and his disciples have just gotten together again in this passage, and are talking about what they have been doing. Jesus suggests that they come away to a quiet place to rest because they have all been so busy they have often not had time to eat.

But the crowds need Jesus and they follow in hopes he will lead them. He has compassion on them, the Scripture says, because they are like sheep without a shepherd. I want to focus today on how it feels to be shepherd-less sheep.

Most of us don't have a lot of contact with sheep these days. We may see them at the zoo or in movies, but I think the image of shepherd-less sheep is something we can still relate to. It reminds me of the traditional Black spiritual, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” There are lots of different versions of the lyrics to this song, but here are some of them. Imagine, if you would, while I read this, the feelings behind these sad, plaintive words.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long, long way from home

And sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone
Sometimes I feel like I'm all alone
A long, a long way from home

I feel restless and I don't know why
I cry for help but still feel alone
Like a motherless child, a long way from home

Lord, I'm lost, I can't find my way
I'm dealing with the struggles in my day to day
My soul is weak and I wanna be strong
I try to run away but I've been running too long

I've been running too long
Like a motherless child
Like a motherless child
Like a motherless child

If you've ever heard this song sung, you can just feel the sorrow and lostness in it. It is like being a shepherd-less sheep, alone and lost.

Now I'm going to ask you to use your imagination a little bit this morning. I want you to close your eyes a minute and try to imagine that you are a sheep roaming around looking for good things to eat and water to drink. You are surrounded by all the other sheep who are doing the same thing. You don't really worry about anything because all your time is taken up getting stuff to eat and drink. You mostly feel safe with all the other sheep, although every once in a while you hear a wolf cry and that makes you a little anxious. Still you know the shepherd will protect you and get you home safely.

Now imagine for another minute that you suddenly notice that your shepherd is gone. It is getting dark and you are hearing that wolf again. You don't know what to do and neither do the other sheep. You all start to mill around, not sure where to go and not wanting to stay out in the dark with the wolves. You can feel your little sheep heart beat get faster and faster.

Okay, you can come back to being human again. Thanks for trying that exercise in imagination. So it may be really hard for us to imagine ourselves as sheep, but I suspect it is not hard to remember times when we have felt afraid and confused, like our leader, our shepherd, is missing and we don't know what to do. Have you had those times in your life?

Are there things going on right now in your life that make you feel like a shepherd-less sheep or a motherless child a long way from home?

It would be normal to be feeling like this as a church right about now. To be a little unsure and worried about the future. You're moving into unknown territory and sometimes it is easy to forget you have a shepherd who is leading the way and keeping you safe. Just when you most need a shepherd to show you the way, God is right there.

What kinds of things send you personally to that place of feeling lost and confused? How about when you lose your job or your relationship ends? How about when your child is suddenly seriously ill? How about when you listen to the news and hear over and over again about the hatred and violence that run rampant in our world today? How about when you begin to believe a nuclear war could actually begin soon?

What do you do when you find yourself in that place?

Well, I've found that it is really important for me to keep an eye on my shepherd, to not lose sight of my leader. I will likely still find myself lost sometimes but if I have been staying close to my shepherd, I'm probably not too far gone. Our shepherd cares about us, loves us and wants to always be there for us, but we have a part in this relationship as well. God, our good shepherd, reaches out to us constantly, speaking to us in hundreds of different ways, guiding us, comforting us, being there for us every minute of our lives.

But we have to listen. We have to pay attention or we will find ourselves wandering off and feeling lost. I think that I have shared this insight about our relationship with God before, but it just feels so profound to me I think it is worth sharing again. I noticed that our relationships with each other are stronger the more time we spend with each other. I believe it is exactly the same with our friend God. The more time we spend with God, the closer we are.

Well, I love the old hymns and one that kept playing in my head while I was reading this Scripture and writing this sermon was Take Time to Be Holy. I'll just remind you here of some of the beautiful words.

Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord
Abide in God always and feed on the Word

Take time to be holy, be calm in thy soul
Each thought and each motive, Beneath God's control
Thus led by the Spirit, Like God thou shalt be
Forgetting in nothing, God's blessing to seek.

I know I may seem like a one-note song at times, but I want to ask again how you spend time with God. Do you pray daily or weekly or monthly or.....sometimes? Our lives are busy and so many things compete for our attention, really important things. We need to take care of our families, do our work, be there for friends, take care of the bills and the car and the house and the pets. It doesn't seem like there is enough time in the day to get everything done.

And the idea of sitting quietly with our God even for 10 or 15 minutes somehow can get lost in the shuffle. We mean to do it, but somehow the day ends and we didn't actually get to that. Well tomorrow, for sure, right? And then we find that tomorrow hurried by as well.

Now I don't know if this is the case for you. Maybe you are able to maintain a faithful prayer time each day and if so, I know you are richly rewarded by the closeness of your relationship to God. But others of us struggle.

We live in a world that often confuses and confounds us. Too often we feel lost and leaderless. We may wonder who is in charge and why they are doing such a bad job! There is too much violence, too much hatred, too much poverty and crime. Too many people suffering and too few people reaching out to comfort them.

I don't mean to sound completely gloomy because we do hear about examples that renew our hope, cases in which one person reaches out to another in love and compassion. But too often we find ourselves feeling like shepherd-less sheep, not sure where to go to be safe and cared for.

The recent hurricanes and floods have swept over people and pulled away all their security. They find themselves without a home, with transportation, maybe without food and safe drinking water. They are lost, shepherd-less sheep. They don't know what to do. And out of this devastation, what has emerged? People helping people.

God has brought us together: the lost sheep and the safe sheep. There are times when we don't see our shepherd, when we don't see God active in this world. Maybe those are the times when God is relying on us to love our neighbors, wholeheartedly and without reservation. That is happening now and I think it is giving some of us hope that all is not lost. We see God alive and well in this world, despite tragedy and destruction. God isn't leaving us on our own. God is a good shepherd.

So back to the idea of feeling closer to God by spending more time with God. I know I find it very hard to just be quiet and present with God, to let God speak to me and guide my thoughts. I have a million things on my mind and they all demand attention as soon as I stop doing what I'm doing. But I can use the technique of mindfulness and just watch those thoughts go past and not worry about them, sort of like observing the clouds as they move across the sky.

I used to worry a lot about whether I was successful in my prayer and meditation time, and often felt like I was a failure because I couldn't stop all my thoughts. Now I know it doesn't matter what happens during that time as long as my intention is to give it to God. My mind will wander and I'll bring it back. I'll share my deepest thoughts and feelings with God and give God a chance to speak to me.

For the next few weeks I'd like to especially encourage you to intentionally spend time with God EVERY SINGLE DAY. Figure out a time that is most likely to work for you. I can't do it first thing in the morning because I fall asleep. I also can't do it right before going to bed because I fall asleep then, too! So I look for the time each day when I am awake enough to be fully present to God, my shepherd. This is a time of transition which will be so much easier if we are all feeling closer to God, to our good shepherd.

And I'd like to end today with a much loved and familiar Psalm that reminds us of what it feels like to be shepherded by God.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Amen.