

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 23:1-3
SECOND LESSON: John 10:1-10
April 30, 2023

“It’s A Sheep’s Life”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Sheep do not have a good reputation when it comes to intelligence. The main problem seems to be their tendency to follow a leader even if it is to their detriment. Sheep have been led off cliffs before. A flock of 100 sheep in central France randomly decided that they liked the looks of a jogger, made her their new leader, and ran along behind her for her entire run through the woods. It made quite a sight. They even stopped when she stopped and waited for her to continue. She said she was going to circle back around to the fields where she found them to try to find the owner.

While not getting high marks on blindly following leaders, sheep are not entirely stupid, however. They can recognize up to fifty faces of other sheep or humans. Even photographs work. A lonely sheep will be comforted by a photo of a familiar sheep. They recognize voices. Every sheep knows the voice of her shepherd. Rams do too. They’re just a bit more opinionated and have large horns. Sheep do not like being isolated. They will pace, chew things and cry out in distress when separated from the flock. Goats, by the way, offer no comfort at all to a sheep. Goats are just annoying. But sheep have personalities, relationships, best friends and sometimes enemies. They keep tabs on one another. They form cliques. Their main protection is to flock together. A goat can jump and kick. All a sheep can do is bite, huddle and run. But it is because sheep are so very dependent upon having the right leader that they are compared to humans. Aside from lemmings, it is humans who can be most easily persuaded or coerced into following one leader blindly. One individual can hold incredible power over a flock.

The illustration Jesus used was perfect because sheep were an everyday part of life in 1st century Palestine. Every village had sheep and shepherds, and when the flock was small most people could recognize an individual sheep belonging to a neighbor. *“Oh yeah, that’s Mrytle. She belongs to Jacob over there.”* A shepherd with a very small flock would even likely bring them indoors at night to sleep in the open downstairs area, while the family slept on the mezzanine level. It kept everyone warm and probably smelled quite strong!

Villages often had a communal sheepfold for those who did not take their sheep into their homes at night. The shepherds would have the flocks out grazing by day but bring them in at night. These sheep pens were enclosures made of stone with one opening. Sometimes thorns and brush were placed on top as a further deterrent to predators and robbers. But it wasn’t a problem separating the sheep out the next day because each shepherd had his own

unique call, and the sheep would separate themselves out and follow their own shepherd. Jesus also “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

Jesus referred to himself as both the shepherd, and the gate to the sheepfold. Shepherd we get, but gate? And how could Jesus be a gate? The answer is, very easily, because in more remote sheepfolds used by one shepherd the shepherd himself was the gate. Once the sheep were all settled in, examined for injuries and looked over, then the shepherd would set himself up in the entrance way and sleep there, literally taking the place of a gate.

A shepherd kept the sheep together in the sheepfold during the night, and he protected the sheep with his own life. He had a rod, which was basically a three-foot club with a large knob on the end with sharp pieces of metal pounded into it, and a staff, a large walking crook convenient for pulling sheep out of awkward places, and a sling shot. David was a shepherd with a high degree of skill with his sling shot, skilled enough that he took down Goliath. Shepherds also often had flutes and would play soothing music to the flock. But a shepherd had to be vigilant. A lion could kill a shepherd. Lions went extinct in Israel about the year 1200, but they would have been there during the time of Jesus, as were packs of wolves and other predators, and of course, human attackers.

Jesus’ audience did not understand his analogy and so he tried to clarify matters, saying, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah saying, “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” Who are these people who both Jeremiah and Jesus were referring to? Certainly, one group fit the description well—the false messiahs who came before Jesus. But it is quite likely Jesus was also referring to the spiritual leaders of his day, just as Jeremiah was during his time. This entire teaching is a response to the Pharisees’ mistreatment of one of God’s sheep, the man born blind who was healed found in chapter 9. These two chapters belong together. There is no natural break here. We have to remember that the bible wasn’t originally written with chapters and verses.

Mini-history lesson here. Chapters were sometimes informally used as early as the 4th century, but it took the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, to create a bible with them in 1227. We still use his chapter divisions today. Verses didn’t come till the 15th and 16th centuries. We owe Langton a lot in terms of organization, but we have to remember that chapter division is artificial. It’s convenient, but it’s not original to the text.

Jesus was repudiating the spiritual leaders of Israel for questioning and threatening the man who was born blind when he was healed. They did not rejoice with him. They were furious with him. His healing did not serve their purposes at all. And what about the spiritual leaders of our day? In Kenya two pastors have just been arrested. Pastor Paul Mackenzie is accused of ordering his followers to starve themselves to death so they would be the first to go to heaven ahead of what he predicted would be the end of the world on April 15th.

Needless to say, April 15th has come and gone, and the bodies of his followers, including many children, are being found in shallow graves. He called his church the Good News International Church. It was neither good news, nor international. A second pastor, Ezekiel Odera, a popular tele-evangelist and pastor of the New Life International Church, also convinced his people to fast to death. Over 103 have died. And there are some still defending these men and claiming God will be angry because they have been arrested!

And what of our nation? What about the pastors who convinced their flocks to not be vaccinated from the coronavirus, leading to the deaths of some of those people? What about pastors who convince people to “claim their healing” and not take needed medication? What about those churches that have become nothing less than the arm of a political party, blurring the division of church and state? What about those peddling a form of the gospel that promises riches to the poor, if they will send money first? And what of the priests and pastors who have abused children and vulnerable adults?

We are sheep. We need to recognize this. It is not always our best attribute. We might be endearing at times, but we are also very gullible and easily misled. It is natural to look at the extremes and think it would never happen to us, but critical thinking takes effort. Leaders bear a huge responsibility and leaders can lead people off a cliff. One charismatic leader can do enormous good or irreparable harm.

Jesus is our PRIMARY shepherd. All others must be held up to that standard, and anyone who teaches something contrary to what Jesus taught, must not be followed. But it is not always easy to tell, because some false shepherds have large followings and good PR. We need to discern the voice of our shepherd, to listen carefully and not credulously.

Jesus says, “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” . . . “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” We are saved, rescued from the lies of false teachers, delivered from exploitation, and restored to God when we follow Jesus. Eternal life is not just about life in the next world. Eternal life begins now in community with other sheep. It begins with us listening for the shepherd’s voice, and following only him. Amen

Jeremiah 23:1-3

23 “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord.² Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the Lord. ³ “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number.

John 10:1-10

10 “Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. **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 listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4** When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. **5** But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”**6** Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

7 Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. **8** All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. **9** I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.**10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.