

“Who Needs You to be a Good Shepherd?”

John 10:1-10

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How much do you know about raising and taking care of sheep? Most of what I know about sheep I learned from Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop. If you remember them, you are telling your age.

Lewis was a ventriloquist who won the Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts in 1952 at the age of nineteen. She became an instant celebrity and was invited to be on every variety show.

From 1960-63, she had her own television show during prime time, replacing Howdy Doody. She had several puppets, including Charlie Horse, Hush Puppy and Wing Ding, but her most famous puppet was Lamb Chop, a sock puppet with whom Lewis had some of her most memorable conversations.

The people in Jesus' time did not have to depend upon a ventriloquist to get their information about sheep. Sheep and shepherds could be seen on almost every hillside and in each valley where grass was growing.

This is why there are so many references to sheep in the Bible. The covenant community of Israel and the early church embraced the metaphor of shepherd as a lens through which people could see the character of God. The tenth chapter of John is one place where this metaphor is prominent. In these verses, Jesus talked about being a shepherd and the gate through which sheep entered or exited the fold.

You cannot read John 10:1-10 without sensing that Jesus is upset. Yes, he talks about sheep and shepherds who know and trust each other, but he also mentions thieves and bandits who steal and kill and destroy. This is harsh language.

What was Jesus concerned about the day he spoke these words? He was concerned about the kind of leaders the religious authorities were, namely the Pharisees. He saw many of them as bad shepherds and was not hesitant to tell them.

Why did Jesus feel this way? He found them to be selfish and self-centered, addicted to power, prestige, attention, money and possessions. They used their powerful positions not to serve people and improve their quality of life but their own. They even made the practice of religion a burden for the people rather than a means for finding the strength to carry their burdens.

This is precisely what the Pharisees did in the previous chapter. After Jesus healed a man who had been blind since birth, the Pharisees refused to celebrate with him or express gratitude to Jesus. Instead, they harassed this man and his parents in an attempt to get them to slander Jesus for healing this man on the Sabbath. In no way did this group of Pharisees reflect God's heart and nature. They were too busy building their own kingdom.

So, what did Jesus do? He boldly condemned these greedy and corrupt leaders by exposing their hypocrisy and challenging them to repent. He used strong images like thieves and bandits who were stealing, killing and destroying to describe them and what they were doing.

At the same time, he offered an alternative vision and model for leadership, which he referred to as the Good Shepherd. Like a good shepherd, his heart's desire was to protect, nourish, strengthen, heal and guide the people he came to serve. His objective was to develop a loving relationship with those he encountered along his way so they would trust and follow him as he empowered them to do what he was doing.

What was the reaction to Jesus' words and vision of leadership? The people Jesus met who were struggling to keep their heads above water were grateful for his compassion and followed him. Many of the religious leaders were furious and plotted ways to have him killed, just as their ancestors sought to silence the prophets before him.

How does this text speak to us today? I gave this a lot of thought last week and want to share some ideas for you to consider.

There are times when all of us are sheep in need of a shepherd. Be careful who you listen to and follow.

Often we find ourselves overmatched by life's steep challenges. Our best efforts are not good enough, or our plans do not turn out the way we thought they would. When this happens, we find ourselves submerged in a tidal wave of chaos, doubt, confusion and fear.

We can lose our way under these circumstances, which means we are susceptible to listening to the wrong voices, following the wrong leaders or trusting the wrong impulses. This is understandable.

Evil is a smooth talker and strong seducer. It always promises what we want and makes it sound easy to obtain. It never, however, reveals the compromises we must make and the high price we must pay to get what we want. This is why we must choose carefully whose advice we seek and whose counsel we follow, doing our best to choose good shepherds whose hearts reflect the nature of God.

On the other hand, there are times when we are called upon to be shepherds who take care of sheep. As parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, administrators, ministers, business owners, civic and church leaders, we must be careful how we lead those who look to us for guidance and protection. As Christians, we never have permission to ignore their needs or exploit them. As good shepherds, our priority is to build healthy families and communities where everyone is valued, treated with respect and encouraged to achieve their potential.

Shepherds have four main duties. They are to protect the sheep from harm, take the sheep to places where they can find nourishment, tend to their wounds when they get hurt and guide them so they don't get lost.

Under no circumstances does a good shepherd abandon his sheep. Dangers from severe weather, wild animals or conniving thieves must be met head on and dealt with courageously. Good shepherds are loyal, brave, determined and unselfish. When necessary, a good shepherd will even put his life on the line and risk everything to protect the sheep entrusted to his care.

This describes who Jesus was. It does not describe the religious authorities Jesus condemned. Does it describe you?

Who needs you to be a good shepherd?

Who is depending upon you to put their interests above your own? Who needs you to be unselfish, loyal, brave, courageous and compassionate?

Who needs you to be a good role model, showing by example how to determine values, arrange priorities and handle adversity, disappointment and temptation?

Who needs you to be a gatekeeper, providing a safe and peaceful place to live?

Who needs you to provide healthy food which will nourish their spirits as well as their bodies?

Who needs you to feel their pain and bind their wounds so they can heal from the many cuts and bruises life inflicts upon them?

Who needs you to be honest with them, providing wise counsel so they don't get lost?

Who needs you to go searching for them because they are lost? Who is hoping deep down in their heart you will not give up your search?

Who needs you to follow in Jesus' footsteps and be a good shepherd? What changes do you need to make in order to be like Jesus? How do you need to restructure your beliefs, attitude, priorities and schedule?

With God's help, will you do this?