

## SAFE AND SECURE

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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### John 10:1-10 (NRSV)

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. [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 hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. [4] When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. [5] They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." [6] Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

[7] So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. [8] All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. [9] I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. [10] The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

## FAITH AND A MINOR BREAKDOWN

This Tuesday began like most weekdays. I was driving to work down Neptune Road, hoping that I wouldn't be delayed too much by road construction. All was going well as I crossed the railroad tracks into town when my car mysteriously quit running. I had enough momentum to make it to the stoplight on Main Street, but the car would not start again. I was stuck. And so were the motorists behind me!

The lady immediately behind me began to honk when I didn't move with the green arrow. That helped a lot. I turned on my emergency blinkers, got out of the car and began to direct traffic ... rather badly.

Isn't it funny how a minor breakdown can turn your world upside down? One minute you're cruising along feeling fat and sassy, humming along to the silky sound of smooth jazz, and the next minute you're apologizing to the really big irate guy who is burning thirty dollars worth of gas in his RV because he's stuck behind your stalled vehicle.

I gave my wife a quick call and then called the church to let my volunteer secretary know that I wouldn't be in on time. I suggested that she have the Presbyterian Women pray for me at their meeting.

As I shuttled irate motorists around my failed vehicle, I tried to remember where I put my emergency number list in the glove compartment. Oh, that's right, I have my wife's car today. I have now idea where anything is located.

Fortunately, a young lady from the Kissimmee Police Department happened by, deftly pulled her cruiser into the turn lane, and called a tow truck. When she learned that I was a minister, she also quoted Scripture ... something about having no anxiety or trusting in the Lord. I jokingly told her that it didn't apply, that they didn't have cars back in Jesus' day.

But, she did have a point. This smiling young lady, who gently suggested that we get off of the street and onto the sidewalk out of traffic, was at that moment an expression of God's grace. She reminded me that it would have been much worse had I been on 192 or the interstate. It's hard to argue with that.

About that time the tow truck arrived. The driver stepped out, shook my hand and said that he was happy to rescue his pastor from a bad situation. It was John Wilder of Wilder Wrecker. It was someone who knew my name and was happy to help me in my time of need. He drove me to the car dealership and made sure that I had a ride back to the church.

He does that for everyone. That's what he does for a living. But, there was something about getting help from someone who knew your name and cared about you that made me feel better. What started out as a really bad day was not so bad after all. The young police woman had it right. I had a lot to be thankful for.

And more than that, I had an illustration for my sermon. I was working even though I hadn't made it into the office! God does indeed work in mysterious ways.

When we find ourselves broken down on the road of life, God is still with us. God in Christ is the Good Shepherd who calls us by name. In an insecure and uncertain world, we are in good hands. My little problem on the roadway just reminded me of that fact.

## GOD THE GOOD SHEPHERD

When Jesus says in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd" he is using a title that was used of God. In the Old Testament God is often referred to as the good shepherd and his people, Israel were known as his flock. The prophet Isaiah wrote that this Shepherd God would "feed his flock ...gather the lambs with his arm ...and gently lead those who are with young." (Isaiah 40:11)

Most of us find this image to be very powerful. In our hour of need God is our shepherd. God cares for us and protects us. God gently leads us. God will keep us safe and sound.

Now we can all say "amen" to that premise until it is tested in the crucible of life. Then we're not so sure that we can trust God to keep us safe and sound. As I told the police officer in the middle of rush hour traffic, I'm not so sure about those Bible verses when life breaks down. Can we really believe that the Lord is our shepherd and will protect us when things aren't going right?

The most famous and beloved Psalm is of course, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. It begins, "The Lord is my shepherd."

One commentator noted that if David had written, “‘The Lord is my King,’ the reader would have looked to a political institution for security.

Had he affirmed, ‘The Lord is my commander,’ the military would have been an image for God. Instead he writes, ‘The Lord is my shepherd.’ ... David did not find his security in political institutions, the military, the economy, or some mythical attachment to the land. He found it in ‘the Lord.’” The Lord was like shepherd to his people.

## TRUSTING IN SOMEONE OTHER THAN THE SHEPHERD

But, isn’t it true that when we feel threatened we often turn not to the Lord but to some other source of comfort and protection. Many of the stories in the Bible are about how God’s people got into trouble because they trusted in something or someone other than the Lord.

Whenever things got bad they remembered the good old days. They remembered when David was king and led their armies in great victories. They remembered the good old days when Solomon was king. Back then inflation was under control, the stock market was booming and the housing industry was going through the roof.

What they needed ... they thought ... was another king like David who would be a great military commander. What they needed ... they thought was another king like Solomon who would lead them in a time of prosperity and growth. That was their vision for the Messiah, the one who would come in the name of the Lord and lead his people in a time of unparalleled power and prosperity.

But, the Messiah who came was not a military commander or a political genius. The Messiah who came was a shepherd, a good shepherd who was willing to lay down his life for his sheep. (John 10:11) Once again the disciples didn’t get it. The Bible tells us that they just didn’t understand. (John 10:6)

## A DIFFERENT KIND OF MESSIAH

Now why didn’t the disciples understand? The image of the good shepherd was a part of their Scripture. Why couldn’t they understand what Jesus was saying? It was plain enough. They couldn’t understand because this image of the Messiah was not popular.

The same is true today. We don’t mind a Messiah who is a powerful military or political leader. We want a leader who promises to give us victory in all situations. But, we’re not so pleased with the image of a shepherd who leads his flock through difficult and dangerous situations, “the valley of the shadow of death”.

Why is that so? Well, first we don’t like straight talk about the difficulties that lie ahead. We don’t want someone to talk to us about the valley of the shadow of death or any other valley for that matter.

And second, if Jesus is the shepherd, then that means we are sheep. And who wants to be a sheep?

Sheep are dumb. Sheep are dependent. Sheep are always getting into trouble. Sheep have no protection against their predators. Sheep are easily led astray.

We want to feel like we are safe and sound, but we want that security by being wise and clever ... not by being dumb and dependent!

And we certainly want a Savior who is above and beyond the problems and dangers of the world. We don't want a Savior who is willing to be crucified for our sins; we want a Savior who will tell us that everything will be alright and that we're not so bad after all.

But, the image of the shepherd suggests just the opposite of what we expect and want. God in Christ is the good shepherd who saves us not by being above it all but by being a part of it all. God in Christ saves us by being subject to those problems and dangers that are a part of what it means to be human. God in Christ comes after us and saves us even when we go astray and endanger the whole flock.

Shepherds were not immune from the dangers that their flock faced. The shepherds were just as vulnerable as their flock to the heat during the day and the cold at night. Just like the sheep, shepherds were vulnerable to animal and human predators.

Shepherds weren't considered to be very good prospects for marriage. They spent too many days in the wilderness with their flock while their family remained unprotected. In the eyes of many the cost of being a shepherd was just too high.

And our Savior was like a shepherd. He knew what it meant to be left out in the cold. He knew what it meant to be under attack by predators. He knew what it meant to leave family and friends to care for a vulnerable flock of sheep-like disciples. And he even laid down his life for these sheep that he loved.

## THE ABUNDANT LIFE

Do we really want to follow a Shepherd Savior? Do we really want to follow a Savior who gives up everything for the sake of some dumb sheep? The Shepherd made it clear to those who would be his disciples. They too would take on the role of shepherd. They too would be asked to lay down their lives for the sheep.

But, oddly enough this willingness to sacrifice for others is not a losing strategy but a winning one. In verse 10 of today's lesson we read that the shepherd's way is the way of abundant life.

If you want an abundant life, if you want a life that is meaningful you obtain it not by getting what you want when you want it. You obtain the abundant life by following the shepherd. You obtain the abundant life by serving others and trusting completely in the one who was the servant of all.

David Buttrick once said that our lives are as brief as the “hyphen between the dates on a gravestone.” So how do we make the most of an all too brief life?

Some people try to grab for all the gusto they can get in life. They live at high speed all the time. They’re like the airplane pilot who radioed into the tower, “Yeah, I’m lost, but I’m making great time.”

We can’t make up for the brevity of life by overindulging and living with a sense of haste. What good does it do us if we live life at a thousand miles an hour but don’t know where we are going?

Jesus tells us where we need to go. The Good Shepherd gently leads us. He shows us what it means to have an abundant life.

In thirty three years he worked in a carpenter’s shop, spent 40 days in the wilderness struggling with what was right and wrong, attended a wedding, and enjoyed a good glass of wine.

He took note of and revered the glory of nature ... the beauty of the lilies, the little sparrows and the sheep. He never threatened his enemies with force, but he always confronted their hypocrisy with courage and conviction.

He concluded his ministry by washing his disciples’ feet and serving them a meal that would remind them of his death.

He didn’t want to die, but he did die ... laying down his life for his sheep.

His life lasted only thirty three years, but his life was abundant ... his life was full, and we are still talking about that life even today.

## FAITH INSTEAD OF FEAR

How can we follow him? How can we embrace an abundant life of service when our natural tendency is to run from our fears?

We do so many things out of fear. We are afraid of what others might think. We’re afraid of losing control. We’re afraid of not having enough money. We’re afraid of failure. These and a hundred other fears keep us from really living the abundant life.

Oddly enough it is those who face the greatest fear, death itself who are sometimes able to tell us the most about what it is really important in life and what it means to really live. One young lady, a few months before her death wrote,

"To die is gain—to be alive in God's unfathomable loving presence. But I believe I am not right now being called to die but to live this earthly life as abundantly as I am able—loving those I have

been given to love, teaching and learning from co-learners in the classroom, and glorifying God, sometimes with my doing but more often with my being."

Some of you may have read about the remarkable professor who only has a few months to live and gave a last lecture to his students. He is living life to the fullest these last few months and is trying to leave something behind that will be of help to his children, his family and his students.

And in doing something that is not often done in our society, talking openly and even humorously about his impending death, he has inspired people to live more fully.

The gift that the dying gives us is an awareness of the fragility and finiteness of life. When our health is good and things are going our way, it's easy to lose perspective about what is really important. But, when our life is on the line, life can become more precious, more abundant.

For those who are traveling through the valley of the shadow of death, the hope of a Shepherd who leads the way is a welcome image.

Whenever I do a funeral the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is almost always requested. We might not like the idea of being dumb dependent sheep when times are good, but very few reject the Shepherd's care in the time of desperate need.

## THE CALL OF THE SHEPHERD

The question is this, "Are we going to listen to the voice of the Shepherd right now?" I'm told that each shepherd had a special call, and the sheep learned to follow that call in all situations. I wonder. We say that sheep are dumb, but at least they listen to the voice of their master. They know who lays across the entrance to the sheep enclosure in the wilderness in order to protect them. The sheep know who will protect them from human and animal predators. The sheep know who will lead them beside the still waters.

Are we smart enough to do the same? Are we smart enough to listen to the voice of our Great Shepherd?

Sometimes it takes a breakdown on the road of life for us to know what is really important. Sometimes it takes a breakdown for us to see just how dependent and weak we really are ... and just how much we need a Savior who cares for us and calls us by name.

The late Andrew Roy was a missionary to China who opted to remain after the Communist takeover in 1950.

He was placed under house arrest and his interrogators attacked the person of Jesus by noting that Jesus told of a shepherd who left "the flock" and went after the one who was lost. The communists argued that such an act was utterly foolish and irresponsible. The collective mass was all that mattered.

Roy defended Jesus by pointing out that when the good shepherd in the parable goes after the lost sheep he gives ultimate security to the rest of the flock. Each sheep thereby knows, "If I get lost, he will come after me."

On the other hand, if the good shepherd cares only for the herd and does not put himself out for the lost sheep, each sheep is left with the ultimate insecurity. They will think, "If I fall one step behind, he will leave me to die."

Fear not little flock. We have a Shepherd, a Savior who will not leave us behind. Today's lesson teaches us that we have a Shepherd who cares for every lamb that has been entrusted to him. He guards the gate of our life with his own life. And when we experience a breakdown on the road of life, he comes to us. He knows our name. And we know his. Amen.

Let us pray.

Jesus,

You are our Good Shepherd. In you we feel safe and secure.

It is tempting for us to think that the secure life, the abundant life consists in always getting things our way and never being challenged.

It is tempting for us to think that the abundant life means withdrawing from a destructive world.

But, your life teaches us something else. Give us such confidence in your care that we can dare to be a shepherd to others. Give us such confidence in your love that we can be more loving. In a world that is obsessed with security let us bring the message that the only real security is to be found in your grace.

We pray for those who need a shepherd this day. We pray for those who have lost their way. We pray for those who are ill. We pray for those who are having a hard time juggling the demands of family and work. We pray for those who feel abandoned and alone.

Thank you Lord, for all that you do for us.

And today, once again we pray as you taught us.

(The Lord's prayer.)

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