

“Jesus the Shepherd”
Psalm 23; John 10:1-10
April 26, 2026
First Presbyterian Church
Marshfield, WI
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As I was telling the children, not all shepherds herd their sheep the same way. Here in the United States, in Canada, and in the United Kingdom, we do it pretty much the same way. We use sheep dogs who are beautifully trained and respond to all kinds of whistled orders. You can tell them to go right. You can tell them to lay back. You can tell them to head the sheep to the left. You can tell them to stop and hold, and you can do it all by whistling to them. They respond instantly. They are like little shadows that surround the sheep. The sheep know them, and they don't actually have to get very close to the herd to make it do what is wanted. I think the dogs actually love their jobs.

But there is another way to handle sheep that doesn't require the use of sheep dogs. When we were teaching in Israel, we would periodically run across shepherds with their herds. There was not a dog in sight, but the sheep were all staying together and walking behind the shepherd. What was most fascinating was when two shepherds encountered one another at a crossroads, or just ran into each other out on a hillside. The shepherds would stop and chat for a while, and the sheep would also stop and socialize, mixing the two herds up totally.

Western shepherds would have been wringing their hands in desperation, but not so in Israel. When it was time to go, the shepherds would wave goodbye to one another, and then head out in two different directions. The thoroughly mixed-up sheep would simply stop what they were doing, and follow their own shepherd. All he had to do was to call them. They knew his voice, and everybody went on their merry way without confusion.

That is what Jesus was telling the disciples when he said he was their shepherd. If they wanted to be safe in this life, and if they wanted to know where and how to travel through life, they had only to listen for the voice of Jesus, and he would guide them. But where and how do we hear Jesus' voice? I can answer that from my personal experience of having been called to the ministry, and I'm sure my story can be matched by Janet, Kristina, and Dan, and perhaps others in this congregation who have felt God calling them in their own unique directions.

In my case, the call of the Spirit was more like an intermittent prodding than it was a bash over the head. I grew up in Boulder, Colorado, because my father was a professor of inorganic and radio chemistry at the University. We moved there when I was nine, and I loved the place, and I still do. When it was time for me to go to college, I respected my dad and I wanted to

emulate him, so I began my undergraduate work as a chemistry major. That worked fine until I got to organic chemistry, and I thought I was doing well, until I hit the final. After it, Dr. Joe Park called me into his office and said he wanted to congratulate me on having such a high score during the semester that I could do what I did on the final and still get a B.

That caused me to look around for a different major. I looked in the biological sciences and took some course work there, but by the time I got to the middle of my Junior year, I had no idea what I wanted to do. Thus, I did what all students with Junior Blues do. I joined the Army. I had visions of being macho and jumping out of airplanes, but the army was wiser than I, and they sent me to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, to learn Russian. When that was over, I was sent to the National Security Agency in Washington, DC, to spend four months learning about cryptography, and then they shipped me off to one of the most obvious places on earth to send Russian Linguists--Harrogate, England, in Yorkshire, the home of the Bronte sisters.

Why there? Because Russian signals paid no attention to national boundaries and just kept going, so that we were able to pick them up in England. Shortly after I arrived, the base chapel asked me if I would direct the choir, and I figured that was serving the Lord, so I took the opportunity. I also met a Methodist minister at Wesley Chapel in Harrogate, and was so impressed with him that I considered staying in England and going into the Methodist ministry. But, in the end, I ignored those whisperings, and decided that I wanted to go back to Colorado, get a degree in voice performance, and come back to Europe to try to make it on the opera stage.

When I returned to the states, I went back to the University, and enrolled in the music school and began performing. Yet, there was this niggling feeling at the back of my mind, that was like the feeling I had before I left for the service. I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing. It was the voice of the Spirit. It doesn't usually hit you over the head with a baseball bat. Instead, it just makes you so uncomfortable that you finally have to listen to it. No matter what I was doing or how well I was doing it, I began to realize that this wasn't what God wanted me to be doing. Thoughts of going into the ministry continued to surface. By this time, I had met Flo Beth, a deeply spiritual person. She would support me in whatever direction I wanted to go. Finally, I met with my minister, and told him I was CONSIDERING THE POSSIBILITY of going into the ministry. He simply said, "When do you want to go before session?" It was a put-up or shut-up moment. I agreed to go before the session at its next meeting, and the dye was cast.

Going into the ministry was never in my plans. I would have preferred to be a veterinarian, because at least animals can't talk back, but that wasn't where God wanted me. I just had to trust that he knew what he was doing with me. I was not at all sure how we were going to

fund this new step. When I was accepted at Princeton Theological Seminary, I applied for a scholarship and was told that I didn't need one since I had a wife. I doubt they could get away with that today.

But there is no doubt that Flo Beth has been an incredible support over the years. She truly has earned her Ph.T. degree, which means "putting hubby through." Thanks to the GI bill, to Flo Beth's various jobs, and to a couple of pastorates and teaching assistantships, we made it through both seminary and graduate school without any debt. Thanks to the promise in the 23rd Psalm that when the Lord is our shepherd, we had sufficient for our needs through our varied and circuitous ministerial lives. He has taken incredible care of us, and the Spirit still whispers his words to us each day, if we will listen.

I would suggest that when you have a feeling that you ought to check in with somebody, that you don't hesitate, but just do it, because you will find that that is often the way the Spirit communicates. It is a quiet voice. It is a thought out of the blue. It is a gut feeling, and we need to learn to follow those promptings, for that is what they are. That is how the Spirit guides us in the right paths that the Psalm speaks of. Just follow the whisperings of the Spirit as they come into your minds or into your hearts, and you can't go wrong. That is what Flo Beth and I have tried to do all our lives. We had no idea where we would end up. We had no idea we would end up in Wisconsin, or that I could be as busy as I wanted to be filling pulpits and giving pastors breaks or in helping churches in between pastors. That wasn't my program for retirement, but it seems to be what the Lord, through the Spirit, is asking me to do. I'm grateful that that still small voice is with me.

One of the places that I find the Spirit most accessible to me is when I sit down to write a sermon. I know the Lord guides me in that process as I pray for guidance and direction. The words are not really mine. They flow too freely. Like everyone who preaches, I study beforehand, but the most important part is letting the text choose me and tell me that it is what the Lord wants me to use as the base for what I will say. If I follow that guidance, then the words will be his, and not mine.

I have just spoken more about my life than I probably ever have before in any venue. The 23rd Psalm is an old favorite of mine and this is where the Shepherd has led me. I love the green pastures and the quiet waters, because that is what the life of one who follows Christ should be about. We live in a time of absolute tumult and mistrust. Listen to the Spirit. It will quiet your minds and mine. The Spirit will speak peace to all of us, and to our hearts and souls. If we know that we are in the hands of God, then whatever is going on around us is of no consequence. He will make our lives and contributions meaningful, and if we are to die, he will make that death the transition to Christ in his fullness. He tells us that there is nothing to fear. We are his, and he is with us.

No valley is so dark or deep that we need to run and hide. I have that absolute knowledge that I am never alone. I feel his hands on my head as he anoints me in the crises and trials of life. It is true that I may have to suffer some trials and physical pain before I leave this realm, but he will enable me to face whatever it is that is coming. I suppose in some ways these are the thoughts of a person who is getting older and knows that he is getting near the end of his mortal existence. But I am comfortable in the arms of the shepherd who has led me by the still waters and the one who has restored my soul in times of trial or sorrow.

“Goodness and mercy” have followed me all the days of my life. It is because Jesus Christ is my Lord, my God, and my Shepherd, and I know that I will “dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life through.” I invite you to place yourselves in the hands of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and trust him in everything that you do and that you face. You will never be alone, and you will never have to be afraid, for you are loved and you are known, and out of that love Jesus gave his life for you and for me and all his brothers and sisters on the face of this earth—past, present and future.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.