

Sermon Text for February 4, 2024

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Numbers 27:16-20 and Matthew 9:35-38

“Jesus the good shepherd”

Last week I gave all of us some homework. Stacy and I did it as soon as we got home. The question I asked you was how does your faith in Jesus make any difference in your day to day life, in your decision making, in your actions, how you view the world. How does your faith in Jesus practically change anything in your life at all? We spoke about it and a few things came to our mind and I'm wondering if you had the same thoughts that we did. Our view and our perspective of the world changes. We don't live for ourselves, or even for each other as romantic as that may be, but we live for Christ which means that we know that Jesus has all things in his hands and under his control so we don't have to be anxiety or stressed out on a daily basis. Jesus is in charge.

We also touched upon our source of identity changes with Jesus as our Savior. We don't identify primarily as a pastor or a chaplain, from our work, or as a husband or wife or mom or dad. We don't get our identity from our surroundings but rather from the fact that we were created in the image of God. That identity never changes and so our security never changes because Christ is the creator of our image and the securer of our image, our image defender. That remains the same regardless of what is happening around us.

Both of our Scriptures today use this metaphor of sheep and shepherd to describe our relationship with God. When we lived in Italy we were in the middle of a region that grew grapes and olives and artichokes and there were a lot of sheep with shepherd roaming about the countryside and along the roadways. You could tell the good shepherds and the not so good ones. The good ones used their staff less and encouraged and coaxed more. The good shepherds were on the move and with their sheep and not on a grassy hillside catching a nap. Our Scripture describes our shepherd as a good shepherd. Let's read.

READ

On Friday I went to the Penn State Hospital out in Landisville and visited someone whom I knew from my time in Florida. I had married them about 24 years ago as a young pastor in Florida and they now live up this way and he is very sick, doesn't have long on this earth. I went in there and his wife and his daughter were there, people I had known and were actively part of my congregation in Florida and we were able to reminisce. He wasn't able to interact too much, but was very present and very aware and able to participate a little bit in our conversation. We read Psalm 23 together and he was able to recite by heart every single line of that Psalm. He

knew it and he said in this time of his life when he was truly entering this valley of the shadow of death, and he knew he didn't have to fear any evil.

What is it about Psalm 23 that elicits almost a reflex reaction of comfort and security? It is because as we go along in this journey together we know that we are in need of a shepherd, of a good shepherd who has our back, is looking out for us, is guiding us along the way. Probably for most of our life we think that we are roaming these fields just fine by ourselves, but then there comes those times when we realize, no, it is not our own doing that provides the security and the stability that a shepherd and only a shepherd can provide.

We see this theme in Matthew where Jesus continues his roaming about the Judean countryside along the shores of Capernaum and beyond. This Scripture is a bit of a summary of all that has happened up to this point in the Gospel. He goes city to city, synagogue to synagogue preaching and teaching, which really was his primary purpose on this earth. He goes curing every disease and every sickness. Along the way he stops and reflects as he sees the crowds of people who are around him and he identifies them as sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless.

This is the identical reason that we find Moses appointing Joshua in our first Scripture reading, in Numbers. God did not want the Israelites to be sheep without a shepherd, lost and wandering and constantly in danger and separated and each one going their own way. It took the Spirit of the Lord to create a shepherd who would really care for and protect the sheep.

But the primary attribute of this shepherd was not his leadership skills, or the size of his staff, or the charisma of his teaching or the power of his miracles. The primary attribute of this good shepherd, and of all leaders I would say whether in the church or in society in general is what we find Jesus exhibiting in vs.36. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them. The compassion that Jesus has for us changes everything. The compassion that we have for people changes everything.

We understand compassion in quite a backwards way in our society. Often it is seen as weak and that which holds us back. But compassion is not weak. Compassion as a church and as individuals and followers of Jesus Christ is where we find our strength. The good shepherd shows compassion to us and so we are required, demanded, encouraged, to show compassion to others. You can never be too compassionate, that is impossible, but you can be too dispassionate. You can never be too compassionate, but you can be too callous. So much bad that happens in our life and in the world around us is a result of a lack of compassion.

We see the reason why it states that Jesus considered the crowds as harassed and helpless. The Romans were brutal in their rule over them. We saw just a glimpse of that with Matthew and how the Romans placed their own people against them to extract taxes that were crippling. There was no one to protect them, to keep them safe. This political environment might be somewhat mirrored in our own. We, like sheep at times, wander from one thought of the day and one leader to another placing our hope and trust in them only to find that they don't care for us anymore than any other person. We rely upon people to provide us our security and not on our good shepherd which provides a political firestorm where we think one person is the end all and will resolve all things. That's not how God works.

What causes Jesus' compassion at this point is not the abundance of sickness he has seen but rather the great spiritual need of the people. No leader in this political season is able to show the compassion that Jesus shows as he wanders the earth. God doesn't want us to be sheep without shepherds. Trying one thing first and then another. Getting caught up in one political waver after another. We should be the same person no matter who is in office. And that person has their security and their comfort and their confidence in the Good Shepherd who is our Savior Jesus Christ and Christ alone.

Matthew then changes the metaphor here from sheep and shepherds to fields and laborers. We have seen a number of churches here in Strasburg come and go in my time. Every time that a new church comes I encourage you to support it and even attend it to let them know that workers in this field are welcome. Sometimes there is a prevailing thought that other churches are competition or sheep stealers. That's not my view, other churches are workers in the field. There are plenty of people around us. Between Strasburg and Strasburg Township alone we have close to 10,000 people. I would guess that we don't even have 5% of the people in our churches on Sundays. There isn't a people problem, there are plenty, there is a laborer problem, people willing to work on their neighbors and friends to invite them to come to church. That's us folks.

Like the blind men from last week if we have tasted and seen the glory of the Lord, if we have experienced the real presence of Jesus then it should simply be impossible to keep it to ourselves. Look at vs.38 and you will see that Jesus tells us specifically to pray to God for something very specific. Therefore, ask, ask that God will raise up others to carry on the work of proclaiming the presence of the kingdom in our midst. The crowds, who think mainly of their physical maladies, have a more serious need of which those maladies are but indicators.

The real need for troubled and bewildered people is met by the fundamental reality Jesus came to bring. This prayer for workers is directed and has to be answered by the church of every generation. As the harvest continues so too does the need for workers. The people of God need leadership that only Jesus can provide, and this leadership brings workers into the harvest.

I have a challenge for you, and this is for all of you, but especially those families with children. Next week is preschool Sunday and this service is going to be filled with families, many of which this is their first time stepping into this church, or honestly any church in a long, long time. Come and worship with them, you will know some of them. Strike up a conversation with them and invite them to come back and be a part of this community. Say nice things about us.

Every person who steps into this church at one time or another, and maybe, just maybe, right now, is in need of a good shepherd, someone who will show them compassion and really care of them. That's who we are, that's what we do, why not ask the Lord to use you to bring sheep into his fold. Amen.