

Baa! Baa!

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

© Copyright 2011
James F. McIntire
All rights reserved.

Text:
John 10: 1-10

May 15, 2011



Hope United Methodist Church
Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA
Phone: 610-446-3351
Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org
Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net
Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

John 10: 1-10

[Jesus said] “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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”



My friend Jack came home from a trip to Israel with hundreds of photos. My favorite was one he snapped when his tourist bus stopped for a young boy to lead his flock of sheep across the road. Jack said that all the American tourists jumped out of the bus to click photos of this young shepherd. A real live shepherd in a real live biblical setting!

Jack's photo showed an adolescent boy, maybe 11 or 12 years old, in the light and heat of the mid-day sun. He was dirty, most likely smelled a bit foul, wore old beat up clothes, and Chuck Taylor All Star sneakers. This was a shepherd of biblical proportions and everyone was surprised at who he was – just a little boy, excited to have his photo snapped by these Americans, and no doubt waiting to be paid for this modeling gig.

This little boy is probably no different than the shepherds who heard the announcement of the angels near Bethlehem one night. A child is born – the Savior of the world. A bunch of pre-teen boys out in the field with their sheep – laughing and playing while the animals slept or ate. Dirty, smelly little boys in raggedy clothes. They were outcasts from their own society, unclean, disposable little boys. Yet it was to them that God revealed the greatest news ever.

The Israel of our Bible had lots of sheep and shepherds. Sheep may seem like loveable creatures, but they also lack a few things. They are not so independent. They mooch along relentlessly seeking grass and they would graze in the same pasture until nothing but dirt was left. They are relatively defenseless against wolves and coyotes. They easily lose their way. It's because of these not-so-positive traits that they need a shepherd and a sheep dog.

And it is this analogy that Jesus uses to describe us. “Don't call me a sheep,” some of us protest, “and I don't need a shepherd either. I can do perfectly well on my own, thank you!” The comparison is not so accepted these days – we don't often like to admit that we need a shepherd.

But what would it be like if God had chosen a different place or time to walk among us in human form? Suppose God had chosen to be revealed in today's Silicon Valley. How interesting would it be to be led by a techno-geek? Or in a place like Libya. Would we like to be led by a ruthless dictator, like Muammar Gaddafi?

There is something special about the biblical imagery of sheep that trust without question. Something about a shepherd who cares without ceasing. About a bond which words can't fully express. Even for most of us who have never seen a sheep except in a petting zoo, the biblical imagery is not too much of a stretch for our understanding. In today's text, despite our fear about surrendering too much of our independence to a shepherd-like

God, we can appreciate some of the profound meanings of Jesus as gate to the sheepfold and voice to the sheep. It's worth asking whether this Middle Eastern imagery can have power even in our urban, cosmopolitan, and industrial centers. In fact, isn't it possible that we long precisely for the kind of relationship between God and us that such an image brings to mind?

Jesus begins in this text with the image of the gate of the sheepfold. We, who are so fiercely independent, are told that we need to be led through the gate otherwise we won't get to where we, for our own good and protection, need to be. "Baa! Baa!," we protest, "I'm not going in there with everyone else. I'll choose my own pasture. I'll be okay over here by myself."

In the face of our insistent independence Jesus says, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me ... will find pasture." It sounds potentially very exclusive. And it is until you consider the meaning in context. A typical sheepfold out in the hills of Judea was simply piled-up rock in a circle with an open entranceway – no wooden or metal gate. At night, the shepherd would lay in that entranceway. Wolves or coyotes would have to attack the shepherd first to get into where the sheep are sleeping. And stray sheep couldn't get back into the flock without waking the shepherd.

The goal of the analogy is for us to realize that God loves us so much and cares for us so much that God is willing to lay down at the entrance to life for us for our own protection. It calls us to respond by being willing to surrender our independence and our own selfish needs, to stop seeking to prove that we need no one at all because we can go it alone. There's enough evidence to show that when left to ourselves we just continue to create one goofy extreme after another—as we, like thieves and robbers, stumble over the shepherd who is the gate.

Then there is the shepherd's voice. When left to ourselves, we who insist on independence, often create a sect or cult, which is resoundingly authoritarian. Granted that new groups need

aggressive leadership, but there is a difference between caring encouragement on the one hand, and coercive control on the other. Jim Jones, David Koresh and the Heaven's Gate group leader all led their people to tragic ends. When these people died, there was no leader lovingly calling them by name. There was simply group control, the mind of the masses hearing the misguided voice of a self-centered leader shouting out commands and demands. Or even if it's not a voice which leads to a violent, destructive end, there are still fake shepherds out there that prey on lost sheep. Jesus reminds us that we can never know when he will return yet there is a loud voice telling his flock that judgment day is next Saturday. It probably isn't but it's not the faithful Jesus follower that even asks the question. It's the wolf who would draw the frightened sheep out from Jesus' sheepfold who makes such a claim. Harold Camping's claim will, I pray, not end in destructive violence next Saturday but that voice will no doubt continue to lead astray some who are weak and lost now and who will remain lost because his is not the voice of a compassionate shepherd. And down through the ages similar voices have had similar results – and on into the future those false shepherds will continue to deceive and prey on the lost.

The voice of a true shepherd calling his or her sheep is a voice which is kind and just, caring and loving. The shepherd's voice is not the voice of a stranger. It is familiar. It knows the sheep's names.

A pastor filling in for a congregation's resident pastor told of the surprise of two children who he met at a church for the first time one Sunday. During the Sunday School hour before worship, he met a five-year-old boy, Pete, and his three-year-old sister, Cassandra. Pete told the pastor that it was also his father's name, and that it was an important name. Cassandra told him lots through her toddler's mumblings. Later, during the Eucharist, the family came to the rail and this pastor called each child by name as he blessed them. They were stunned that he knew who they were.

“And so are we,” the pastor wrote, “when Jesus claims to know us as his sheep, by name. There is something important about personalization ... knowing that we are accepted and loved by one to whom we are not strangers. There is no place for strangers in our faith. Isn’t that amazing!”

There is truly something amazing in nature about parents and children knowing one another’s voices.

I hate bats – some of you may know that about me – I hate bats. Yet I read that at some primitive level, mother bats can find their babies in the midst of hundreds of thousands of other bats simply by the sounds they make. Or recall the documentary, *March of the Penguins*, when the mothers return from their months-long journey to find food and they can detect the sound of their babies’ distinctive song among the thousands in the community.

And research shows that blindfolded human mothers and fathers can identify their infants – children I love, bats I hate! – in group settings by the sound of the cry. It is awesome to think, extending such a principle, that God knows us by our baptized names and responds to our needs. There is something deeply moving about the fact that, as fiercely independent as we may claim to be, deeper yet within us is the longing to hear ourselves called and claimed by the voice of God. St. Augustine said it this way, “Oh God, you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

As Christians, we can’t simply drop this subject at the point when we feel comfortable with having been cared for by a crucified and resurrected shepherd. Knowing how we are claimed and called leads us to a whole new way of life. Of course, if our God were a techno-geek or a vengeful dictator or a disinterested divinity who, as Robert Frost wrote, “once declared that he was true, then drew the curtain and withdrew,” we would have no need to take this a step further.

But the shepherd/sheep analogy moves us forward. It encourages us to not only hear the shepherd’s voice, but also to seek caring, nurturing relationships with other sheep as well. There is an ancient Jewish legend, which gives perspective to this. It is said that when Moses was feeding the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, a young kid ran away. Moses followed it to a spring where it found water. Having let it take its fill, Moses carried it back on his shoulders. God then told Moses, “Because you have shown pity in leading back one of a flock belonging to a man, you shall lead *my* flock, Israel.” (Barclay, 55)

As we learn from God’s own loving shepherding in our lives, we are given opportunities to care for each other. In this way, our community grows in its ability to stand in the gate to provide mutual protection and to call one another by name, demonstrating our love and concern for one another.

Admittedly, there are some problems with viewing ourselves as sheep in need of a shepherd, but there are insights that come from recognizing that “I really can’t escape being part of a flock.” The shepherd/sheep analogy affirms my place in the community. There is no such thing as a solitary sheep. And if there is, it’s lost, and the shepherd has to find it.

We need to be willing to admit that we tend to goof things up when we go it alone. We re-invent the mistakes others have made before us. We must know that we are not just some unimportant accidental number in the universe puzzle – God reassures us that we are loved and affirmed and protected by the one who also gave us life. And that reality should empower us to become shepherds ourselves, leading each other out of concern and love for each other.

There are sheep all around us, bleating and baa-ing away. They belong to us and we belong to them, and I can’t help wondering if there’s a name I need to call or a helping hand I need to offer.

Do you hear it too? Baa! Baa! They are calling to us and we are calling to them. Hear the voice of the Shepherd who loves and protects us. Hear the voice of the other sheep in the flock as well. Lead each other in the spirit of the Great Shepherd's voice of calm in the midst of a bleating flock.

Amen.