

October 28, 2007
 The Church (#5) – The Flock Jesus Shepherds
 Psalm 23 / Ezekiel 34:1-16 / John 10:1-30

There are few images more precious to many people than the image of God as our Shepherd. In fact, the most loved psalm in all of Christendom or Judaism is without question Psalm 23 – the Shepherd's Psalm. There are very few people (including non-Christians) who don't at least know the first verse, and many could quote sections of the whole Psalm.

And it's THAT IMAGE that I want to look at today: The Church as the Flock which God Shepherds. Jesus as the "Good Shepherd," and us, or the "Church" as His "Sheep."

Now, in doing so I will confirm many of the reasons why that imagery is so precious to us. But I will also have to erase or correct some false notions connected with the metaphor of us being sheep. Because when rightly understood, the assertion that "we are like sheep," though comforting in one way, is a not all that flattering in many other ways!

The "God as Shepherd" imagery we find comforting. But the "us as sheep" imagery causes many people a bit of a problem!

Think of it this way: Why is it that God, having so many, many options of animals to choose from, chose to equate the Church, or us as individual Christians, most commonly to sheep?

Why not a strong, fearless, bone-crushing BEAR, rearing up on his hind legs, roaring fearlessly and swiping with his massive claws, as was the case in some Babylonian religions? A sleek, confident, cunning CAT as was the case in Egyptian religion?

Or the massively strong BULL of the Baal or Fertility cults? Why not a den of stealthy, agile, stalking LIONS – king of hunters, as in Assyrian religions; or a herd of strong, muscular, sleek and thoroughbred STALIONS as in Native American religion?

Why not the screeching and high-flying HAWK as in animistic religions; or the dignified, stately EAGLE, prey grasped in its talons and wings spread in all their splendor, as was the case in Roman religions or is the case in American culture in general?

Didn't God know that those images would have been much more flattering to our egos, and much more successful in drawing MEN into the church? Didn't He know that sheep or lambs are not very flattering, esteem building, manly or macho type symbols?

You see, I can pretty much guarantee that if you took a bunch of kids or teenage guys (or even girls) and got them together to pick an “animal” to represent their sports team (any animal) “sheep” wouldn’t even be in the running!

“Rams,” yes, because they’re aggressive, agile, sure-footed, daring, powerful, and can make or take a crushing blow with head without much personal damage. But not “sheep!” At least not the type of sheep Jesus is talking about!

Can’t you just see the opposing football team? “Hey, we’re playing the Penridge Sheep or the Quakertown Lambs this weekend!” They’d die laughing! People just don’t name their teams sheep or lambs (except maybe in pre-school). They name them Wolverines, Lions, Timberwolves, Diamondbacks, Jaguars, Bears, Eagles or Tigers. But NEVER sheep! (Not if they want to attract players or be taken seriously by their opponents!)

So, why is it, that with all the options God had available to Him, He choose to equate us most commonly with a flock of docile, weak, timid, defenseless, easily frightened, unpretentious, shabby, old, waddling sheep!? Or worse yet, helpless and fragile little lambs?

They are images or self-designations it’s hard to want to embrace or rally around, especially for guys! It even makes it easy to see how Hitler, looking at such symbols, could call Christianity “the religion of weakness,” and choose not to make “sheep” or “lambs” the symbolic animal around which he would rally the troops of the Third Reich!

You see, I wish I could say God viewed us as a more dignified type animal. But He didn’t. Of all the animals native to, or known by people in the Middle East, Asia Minor or Southern Europe (where the Bible was written—and there were plenty to choose from), He chose most commonly to equate us, His Church, or His people, to sheep. WHY?

That’s the question I hope to help you answer today. And again, I stress that most of the answers to that question are **NOT** at all flattering to the human ego!

Those of you who have actually had sheep or been around sheep or know anything about real sheep (not just storybook sheep) will be better fitted to understand what I’m about to share. Because only those who know little or nothing about what sheep are really like, could make a “purely esteem building,” “feel good sermon” out of this metaphor!

To the humble, this message probably won’t cause many problems. In fact, it will bring great comfort and encouragement.

But to anyone who is proud, what I'm about to share may seem be a bit insulting. Sorry about that — sort of!

It is never my intention to purposely offend anyone. Though I must also say that Scripture does not allow me to circumvent truth simply because someone may be offended by it.

“The ministry of God’s Word” (as the old saying goes) *“is meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”* *“To bring down those who think too highly of themselves, and lift up those who think too lowly of themselves.”* To those who come to God with a need, God is quick to minister to that need. But to those who think they have no needs, God is relentless in getting them to see how needy they are!

In fact, the person who is NOT willing to come to God (on a regular basis) saying, “I need You,” will not last long in their Christian walk. Because the entire basis of the relationship between God and man is that ***GOD WHO IS SELF-COMPLETE AND HAS NO NEEDS*** condescends to minister to ***PEOPLE WHO ARE INCOMPLETE AND NEVER CEASE HAVING NEEDS***. Out of His eternal sufficiency He compensates for our habitual insufficiency! And that’s not meant to be an insult, it’s simply the truth!

Which brings us to the **FIRST** and most prominent fact or lesson concerning sheep in the entire Bible — The lesson that sheep, being weak and helpless and defenseless, need someone to watch over, protect and care for them on a habitual basis. Sheep are totally dependent on a Shepherd for just about everything — their health, well-being and even survival.

“Sheep,” as the African-born scientist and shepherd Phillip Keller rightly points out, *“are so timid and easily panicked that even a stray jackrabbit suddenly bounding from behind a bush can stampede a whole flock... They have little or no means of self-defense. They are helpless, timid, feeble creatures whose only recourse is to run... Two dogs have been known to kill as many as 292 sheep in a single night of unbridled slaughter.”*

It’s just the opposite of the type of self-image that most Americans, in our “be strong, assertive, independent and self-sufficient society,” intentionally seek to breed in themselves and others.

Yet despite our human aversion to seeing ourselves as “needy creatures,” that is how Jesus viewed us — the “Good Shepherd,” who on one occasion looked out on the crowds of people following Him, and was said to be “filled with compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

On another occasion He equates us with the second most commonly used image — one that conveys a similar idea — the image of us being children — and inviting all who were “weak and heavy laden (that is, weighed down by sin, or the burdens of life)” to come to Him for rest, allowing Him to yoke Himself to us and lend HIS shoulder to bear OUR burdens.

You see, no matter how you look at it, the primary and most frequently repeated declaration of Scripture regarding sheep is this: Sheep are needy! They are weak and defenseless, and without a shepherd to lead and provide and care for and protect them, they are in grave, grave danger at all times! Sheep that are not shepherded, are a disaster waiting to happen!

In fact, they are so helpless, and so timid (we actually use the word “sheepish” to refer to timid people who are jittery or lack confidence) — they are so easily confused and essentially defenseless, that they are like walking meals waiting to be devoured!

In our culture we might convey the same type of idea by using the imagery of *“A 2 or 3 year old child walking down the side of a highway, alone, or with a bunch of other 2-3 year old children! Or that of an infant playing along the shore of a river filled with alligators, without either parent anywhere in sight.”* It’s a disaster waiting to happen!

A shepherdless flock (as any sheep herder will tell you) will always be a flock that is sickly, diseased, scattered, plundered, ravaged by disease or wolves, and devoured by every type of parasite, worm or predator.

In fact, it was with the image of ***US AS AN ISOLATED SHEEP*** firmly engrained in his mind (1 Pet. 1:2-4), and **NOT** that of ***US AS A WELL-TRAINED AND WELL-EQUIPPED BAND OF SOLDIERS***, that Peter says 4 verses later, “Beware, for your enemy the Devil roams about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” — a lion on the prowl for helpless, powerless, defenseless SHEEP!

Which makes the message to us pretty clear: That apart from God’s power, and presence and protection, Satan would rip us to shreds as easily as a LION would devour a helpless LAMB.

And it’s not just that we’re powerlessness against SATAN apart from the Shepherd. It’s also that we are weak and powerless and defenseless against the addictive nature, and enslaving influences, and insidious power of SIN (which the Christian underestimates only to his or her own spiritual peril).

If Satan can be equated to a lion, then sin can be equated to a wolf or ravenous dog — against which the sheep also stands no chance of survival apart from the power and protection provided by the presence of the Divine Shepherd and Overseer of our souls!

And it is the contrast between our weakness and SATAN'S strength / or our innate powerlessness when pitted against the insidious power of SIN and TEMPTATION / that caused God to equate us with SHEEP. NOT with animals of POWER and STRENGTH and PROWESS and VICTORY, but sheep, who like us, LACK IN THEMSELVES the power necessary to defend themselves against enemies of such superior size, cunning and power.

And the sooner we learn and become thoroughly convinced of those facts, and turn to the Shepherd for what we need, the healthier and better off we'll be!

Which brings us to the **SECOND** fact, closely related to the first. "Sheep," says Keller, "do not just 'take care of themselves' as some might suppose. They require, more than any other class of livestock, endless attention and meticulous care... They are prone to parasites, worms, nematodes and scab... If sheep become soaked and chilled with a freezing rain, the exposure can kill them in a very short time. They are thin-skinned creatures, susceptible to colds, pneumonia and other respiratory complications...."

You see, anyone who knows anything about sheep, knows that sheep cannot live well, or live long, or even live at all — without a shepherd! And the same is true for us — in both the temporal and eternal sense!

In the temporal sense, though we don't often tend to think in these terms, our very existence depends entirely on God! It is He, says David in **Psalm 139**, who *"knit us together in our mother's womb."* He is the One, says Paul in **Acts 17:25**, *"who gives us life and breath and everything else."* He is the "Life" from which all other life is derived!

Every beat of our hearts, and every breath we take – the air we breathe, and the food we eat and the water we drink — the ability to think and reason and feel and see and speak and smell and move and laugh and love and care and everything else comes from God alone. Without Him we would not be, and were He to draw back we would cease to exist!

"By HIM all things were created," says Paul of Jesus in **Col. 1:16**, *"and in Him all things hold together (or are held together)."* It is His absolute and cohesive power which acts as the, glue that sustains and keeps everything in universe in its place — from the orbit of the planets, to molecules of water, to the protons and electrons in the core of an atom!

That's the Bible's point in calling us sheep — to convey the truth that just as sheep are entirely dependent upon a shepherd for life and health and everything else, so also we are entirely dependent upon the God who gives us life and breath and everything else (though getting proud, self-sufficient people to admit that is not the easiest thing to do)!

Yet our dependence upon God goes even further than the supply of our physical needs. Because we don't merely have a dependence upon God for our physical existence, we also have a dependence upon God for our spiritual existence.

It's a dependence that evidences itself in our relentless quest for happiness, fulfillment, wholeness or a sense of completeness in life — a longing that drives the soul to search for the Divine in its quest to experience the "shalom of God" (as our Hebrew forefathers put it) — that sense of total well-being that comes from living at peace, and in harmony with both God and the world He has made.

As Sherwood Elliot Wirt once wrote:

"Every human being would like to be more than he is. That is what makes him a human being (and differentiates him from the animals). Dogs are content with their dog-like features, and cows are content with their cow-like features, but not people. Whatever you may think of the question of origins, animals and humans can be said to have this difference: animals as a rule are satisfied to be what they are, humans are not... What is the problem? It is the perennial problem of the unsatisfied human spirit in its thirst for God."

Solomon attributed that dissatisfaction in the human soul to the fact that *"God has set eternity in the hearts of men"* (Eccles. 3:11). That is, as distinct from all other animals, man is always on a relentless quest for something more, something greater than himself; something beyond the self; something eternal and immortal. (And I don't believe that statement simply refers to people's yearning for eternal life, or life beyond the grave.)

Rather, I believe he means that in the hearts of people there is a craving for knowledge of, and communion with the Eternal One! *It isn't living forever that satisfies the soul, it's living forever with God! That's the fault with much modern day evangelism—they offer people the chance to live forever instead of offering them God!*

The Psalmist describes the inner yearning for God this way in Psalm 42:1: *"My soul pants after You, O God, as a deer pants after streams of water."*

St. Augustine expressed it this way around 350 A.D. in his well known prayer: *“O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless and searching until they find their rest in Thee.”*

One thousand years later Lady Julian of Norwich (England) wrote (in the late 1300's):

“God, of Your infinite goodness give me Yourself, for You are enough for me. If I ask for anything less, I know I shall continue to want. Only in You do I have everything I need.”

And three hundred years after her (around 1650 A.D.) Blaise Pascal the brilliant French physicist would write in his *Pensees* or Thoughts on Religion:

“There was once in man a true happiness, of which there remains to him only an empty trace which he vainly tries to fill with things from his environment. Yet all these efforts are inadequate, because the infinite abyss in the human soul can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object — that is, by God Himself.”

Yet it only takes a scant look around to see that few believe them. That “a little religion” may make us a bit more well-rounded, or that trying to be moral may be helpful, few would contest.

But to suggest that one's inner sense of frustration with life; their discontent, or lack of happiness, and lack of fulfillment—that gnawing sense of emptiness and incompleteness all stem from the lack of God in our lives — that seems a bit too extreme, even for many religious folk.

WHY? Because there's a sense in which we have ALL swallowed a bit of the lie that tells us that things from our environment can indeed fill that sense of emptiness and make us happy.

In fact, that's the basic philosophical premise of “materialism” — the lie that having or acquiring temporal material things can fill the void within the human soul, and make us happy apart from God. The spiritual void created in the human soul when God withdrew from it the presence of His Holy Spirit, and hid His face from us because of our sin and rebellion.

Look around and you can see it everywhere! People somehow thinking that the THREE primary, materialistic God-substitutes will make them “happy.” **What are they? People, Places and Things!** And interestingly, they are all symbolically represented in the nature and lives of sheep!

The 1st) is **PEOPLE** as a God-substitute lie. It goes something like this: *“If only I had a different family, different kids, different relatives, different co-workers, a different husband or a different wife... if only I had married Jill instead of Sue, or Frank instead of Bob, then I'd be happy.”* No you wouldn't! Because people can't make us happy!

People can mask or soothe or take the edge off that lingering sense of emptiness, but they can't fill the God-shaped-void in the human soul! Only the restoration of God's presence can do that!

And in some ways sheep fall prey to that lie just as we do. Sheep are communal animals. They have a herd instinct. They stick close together in flocks, convinced there is safety in numbers.

That is, they trust in each other for their sense of well-being.

But it's only an illusion! Because whether you have one sheep, or 10 sheep, or 1000 sheep, they are still no better able to fend off a wolf, a lion, or a bear than one lone sheep!

That is, they think their security and well-being comes from each other, when in reality, it comes from the shepherd who watches over that flock with his rod and staff (or nowadays, his rifle)! So, just like us, sheep are deceived into believing the lie that their happiness, safety and well-being comes from being close to EACH OTHER, rather than close to the SHEPHERD!

The 2nd) is the PLACES as a God-substitute lie. It goes something like this: *"If only I lived there instead of here; in the country instead of the city; in that neighborhood instead of this one; or that country instead of this one; or that house instead of this one. If only I lived on a South Pacific Island, instead of here in Pennsylvania, then I'd be happy."*

No you wouldn't! You'd only take your unhappiness with you to those places, and add to it the disappointment of discovering that changing places doesn't change the heart! I saw it often in both Honduras and the Dominican Republic. Americans, and Europeans (even some who were missionaries) thinking that if they could just get away from Europe or the States and the stresses or responsibilities they had there, they'd be happy. Only to discover that their problems not only followed them there, but were *compounded* by the hardships, cultural differences and language difficulties!

Sheep are the same way. Keller points out frequently the tendency of sheep to wander off in search of greener pastures, and in doing so, getting in all sorts of additional trouble! One of the reasons Isaiah could say, *"All we like sheep have gone astray..."*

The deceitfulness of sin convinces us that the problem is **WHERE WE LIVE**, instead of **WHO LIVES IN US** (or fails to live in us) regardless of "where" we live!

Jesus assures us that, "Where our treasure is, there will our heart be as well." And the message is clear: If God is our treasure; if we have Him and hold on to Him as the most precious of all things, we can be happy anywhere!

That, I believe, is why Abraham could let Lot have the best, most well-watered, and fertile lands, while he took the leftovers. **Why?** Because Abraham had God as His treasure and thus he knew he could be content and prosper anywhere! His happiness and well-being didn't depend on PLACES!

And LAST) the THINGS as a God-substitute lie. It goes something like this: *"If you'll just buy bigger, better, faster, prettier, other or more things you'll be happier!"*

It's part of the air we breathe in America! Any American (so we're told) who drives down the road, listens to the radio, uses the computer, reads a newspaper or magazine, or watches TV is bombarded with over 2000 commercial messages a day! All of which essentially say this: *"What you have is not good enough, and what you need is what I'm trying to sell you! Buy it and your life will be easier, healthier, less stressful, more comfortable, more enjoyable, more relaxed, carefree or worth living."*

They promise frowns and frustrated looks will be turned into smiles and laughter, because you'll have less work and more free time, fewer interruptions, faster service, fewer dropped calls, higher definition, better sex (the result being a happier self and a happier spouse)!

You'll have fewer germs, whiter teeth, a smaller wasteline, bigger muscles, fuller hair, better smelling breath and just a better overall quality of life!

Whether it's stated or not, that's the repeated message: Newer things, different things, better things, bigger things, or simply more things will bring you greater happiness and fulfillment.

You see, Keller makes an interesting point when he says that sheep are inadvertent collectors of THINGS! *"Sheep simply have too much wool,"* he says. *"And often the fleece becomes long and heavily matted with mud, manure, burrs, and other debris."* Sheep literally become weighed down by an overabundance of wool and an overabundance of junk that get's snared in their overabundance of wool!

And isn't that like us? As he goes on to say, we also can *"find that the clinging accumulation of things, and possessions... weigh us down, drag us down, and hold us down... Whenever I found that a sheep was being cast down because its fleece was too heavy or too thick... clogged with manure, mud, burrs, sticks, and ticks... I would shear it clean and so forestall the danger of having the ewe lose her life. What a relief to be rid of it all!"* *"The self-imposed discipline of poverty and privation,"* he says, *"could do us all a world of good."*

Often getting **RID OF** things rather than **ACCUMULATING** things makes us far more healthy, and reminds us that the infinite abyss in the soul can only be filled by the presence of infinite God that vacated His place there because of our sin and rebellion.

Lady Julian was right: The more one has of God the less they crave things! *“Of Your infinite goodness give me Yourself,”* she says, *“for You are enough for me. If I ask for anything LESS (and everything other than God qualifies as “less”), I know I shall continue to want.”*

WHY? Because material things can **NEVER** make that sense of emptiness go away! Trying to fill the spiritual void with “things” is like putting a bandaid on an ulcer!

Pascal was right: *“The infinite abyss in the human soul can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is, by God Himself.”*

And so was Augustine: *“Our souls are indeed restless,”* (and will continue to be restless, as he likewise pointed out) *“until they find their rest in Him.”*

That’s what I urge you to do – Rest in Him. Go to the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, and put your full and unreserved trust in Him. “Taste and see that the Lord is good,” and then let His joy be your strength, His presence fill your soul, and His love flood your heart.