

The Care of the Good Shepherd

Isobel was shepherd Darcy's favorite sheep. The little lamb was playful and inquisitive – too much so for her own good. That's because the pasture was near a busy highway, and despite the fence that separated the land from the roadway, there would always be a possibility that a wandering animal could get itself in danger. That was just up Isobel's alley!

It happened on a hot summer day when most of the sheep were seeking the shelter of several large trees. A few were out feeding, but Isobel was intrigued by the whooshing sound of the vehicles and wanted to see more. Ambling over to the fence, she looked for a place to take a closer look and found one where water had caused a small mudslide into the ditch. In no time at all she was under the wire and climbing up the other side, very near the shoulder. It was then that Darcy noticed her and the trouble she was in.

Dashing as fast as possible over to the spot, he slid under the fence himself and with one big jump across the ditch was right beside the sheep still oblivious to what could happen. Strong arms snatched the lamb out of harm's way and brought Isobel back to safety into the enclosure. "You mustn't go there again! See how the others are resting under those trees? That's what you should be doing when the sun is so bright and hot." And he led the little sheep over to where she would be safe for the rest of the afternoon.

In our gospel reading and our Psalm, Jesus compares himself to a shepherd, a metaphor that the Old Testament frequently used for God in describing how he works with us and provides for our needs. Let's look more closely at the various ways Jesus our Shepherd fulfills the tasks of that occupation to its very best level.

1) The Good Shepherd has genuine care and concern

"I am the good shepherd." (John 10:11a) The Greek word translated 'good' in this verse is *kalos* which implies a moral quality beyond simply an obligation to duty. Commentator William

Barclay explains, “The phrase ‘the good shepherd’ is similar to the phrase ‘the good doctor.’ When people speak of a good doctor, they’re thinking beyond the doctor’s medical skills to that person’s kindness and compassion. In the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd there is loveliness as well as strength and power.” Jesus’ knowledge of the mechanics of the job and his ability to do them are overshadowed by his intense passion for the welfare of the flock – each and every person.

Perhaps we can ask ourselves what is our level of care and concern for the people that we regularly interact with at home and in our communities? Does it come from a passionate interest in their welfare, or only a superficial nod to their presence and a vague general idea of their life situation? Especially for those we’re entrusted with, the hope is that Jesus’ model would be reflected in our behavior.

2) The Good Shepherd knows his sheep personally

“I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as I my Father knows me and I know the Father.” (John 10:14-15a) In our opening story, Darcy the shepherd had given each animal a name. As he got to know their individual personalities, he was able to keep an eye on the more adventurous ones for possible future incidents. How much more does Jesus know each of us in his flock: our names and personalities, our strengths and weaknesses, our struggles and challenges as well as our successes and triumphs. And all of this isn’t just superficial knowledge, but as the Greek word *ginosko* reveals, intimate details that guides his relationship with us: providing for our needs, opening opportunities to grow in character as we seek to model our lives after his, spending time answering our prayers and guiding our concerns. Jesus knows his own, because he has lived as a human being and has experienced the joys and sorrows of physical life. His unity with God defined his every move.

For those who have been entrusted to us for care and provision, are these principles being reflected in how we act towards others? Do they illuminate our words and deeds towards people at work, in places of business, in community gatherings?

3) The Good Shepherd is open and inclusive

“I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.” (John 10:16) A sheepfold is an enclosure where the sheep live when they’re not grazing for food. It provides security and fosters a sense of community. This is especially important if the sheep are from different flocks or herds. No doubt Jesus was thinking of the many Gentile peoples who would become a part of the faith in the future, joining with the Jewish core of converts that made up the early church. The unifying factor is that these people “will listen to my voice” – pay attention to Jesus’ words and instructions, thus joining themselves to those who likewise do the same.

Unfortunately, the organized church has tended to be a collection of exclusive clubs divided along denominational, national, racial, educational, vocational, or financial lines. These barriers are inappropriate for Christians. Who are the people that are ignored, discredited or go unnoticed? How welcoming are we of those who are different from us? Are we sending signals of limitation on those who may want to join us?

4) The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep

“The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again.” (John 10:11b,17-18) Those involved in risky occupations accept the challenge and take precautions, but don’t expect to lose their lives on the job. Jesus, however, went further by saying his purpose was to

die for the sheep, that he was doing so of his own choice, able to give his life up and take it back as a personal decision. This adds another dimension to what the other gospels tell us about the death and resurrection of Jesus, that it was mainly God's doing. Jesus' personal love of all people moved him to choose that path on his own.

That should make us all the more confident when we approach him for help and guidance. Jesus knows each one of us intimately and personally, tailoring a relationship that meets our individual needs, as listed in Psalm 23: "He lets me rest...he leads me...he renews my strength. He guides me along right paths... [he is] close beside me...[he] protect[s] and comfort[s] me...He honors me...my cup overflows with blessings." (excerpts from v.2-5) Eternal life is promised at the end of our days (v.6b) All this can only come from one passionately determined to bring wholeness and peace to the human family.

Contrast this with the attitude of a shepherd employed to oversee the flock. "A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep." (John 10:12-13) Without a vested interest in the business (ex. partial ownership), an employee won't have the commitment to endanger himself just to protect the interests of the employer. As creator of all things, Jesus has more than a vested interest in humanity – "God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created" (John 1:2-3a) Only he has the strength and might to defeat the devil, our enemy, restore us, and bring us together out of deep care and compassion.

Listen to how our New Testament reading tells this, "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Do you want to know how [the crippled man] was healed? Let me clearly

state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” (Acts 4:8a,9b10a) The hope of humanity is in Jesus’ continued presence and work among us leading to renewal, transformation, and eternal life.

Pam Bostwick sat on a large rock overlooking a small lake not far from her home. Her life seemed to be at a standstill with mounting debts, troubles at work, and having to take care of her children as a single parent. In the early morning dawn, she saw an elderly man fishing from a spot on the beach. When he saw her, he set his fishing rod down and came over. His eyes reflected kindness and wisdom.

“You seem really sad,” he spoke softly, “You’re carrying far too many burdens. You need to get rid of some.” “I don’t know how to,” replied Pam. “Here, take a stone and throw it into the water, into the deepest part you can.” She did so and felt better just at releasing some tension. “Do it again, as many times as you have things that are troubling you. It’ll give you a comfort you’ve never known.” Amazingly, the simple exercise was what she needed to cast away the negative emotions that were crippling her, taking away wholeness and peace.

The old man returned to get his gear and put them in an old car parked nearby. He had a few parting words of advice. “Jesus is here with you. Give those burdens to him. He’s strong enough, and he’s able to bear them. You’ll feel a lot lighter going home.” “But what if sadness comes again?” Pam questioned. “There’ll always be sadness. You’re not alone with it as you have those feelings. Just share them with Jesus, and God will help you through it.”

The Good Shepherd – “Jesus the Son of God...this High Priest of ours [who] understands our weakness, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.” (Heb.4:14-16) Let’s be thankful of this great blessing. Amen.