

How many of us have grown up around sheep? We see horses, cattle, goats, chickens and crawfish readily in our area. I saw each of them on my drive into the church today. But sheep – those are much rarer occurrence. We may have seen them around on occasion but it is not something that we have lots of experience with. As we look at Jesus' promise that he is the Good Shepherd, let's look for a moment about sheep so we can better understand what Jesus is offering.

The Canadian Agriculture Department has put together a helpful sheet on sheep. Listen to this list and ask yourself, do you have any of these traits?

Sheep are social animals, so try and prevent seclusion.

Sheep by nature are followers; let them follow and don't drive them as you would cattle.

Sheep are docile animals by nature.

Sheep have good memories; these memories need to be positive ones as much as possible.

Sheep like routine, so be patient when introducing something new.

Sheep reactions are predictable, so use them.

Sheep react negatively to loud noises and yelling.

Sheep tend to move in the opposite direction of the handler.

Sheep move best when not afraid, so work slowly and calmly.

Sheep will move towards other sheep.

Sheep have no depth perception, so shadows, dark surfaces and water are an issue.

Sheep fear new visual objects

Sheep can also be very destructive- there are 1.2 billion sheep in the world

While the list is not a perfect list of human behavior – we certainly share some characteristics. It helps us to see why Jesus is using this metaphor to explain the relationship between humans and God. In our reading we hear Jesus describing the difference between the shepherd and a hired hand – the primary difference is that the later will run away, abandoning the sheep when danger is present. The shepherd on the other hand will lay down his life for his sheep. Jesus is in a public teaching moment that begins back in chapter 8 to a gathering of fellow Jews. This is before the Passover, when Jesus begins his farewell discourse with the disciples and explicitly tells the disciples that he will suffer and die. But in this moment he is preparing them demonstrating what the Good Shepherd will do.

Jesus, at the end of our reading, says that he knows his own and his own know him. So how do we know Jesus and what does being a good shepherd in our lives look like? The best place to learn this from scripture is from the 23rd Psalm. This is the definitive scripture read at funerals. Why? Because we are hurting and broken hearted. Even when we know a death is a release from pain and suffering for the deceased, our pain is just beginning. I invite you to close your eyes and hear these words:

**The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.**

**He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. (KJV)**

What promises are found here? We have no want, the shepherd provides what we need including:

- Rest – the first thing provided is rest – and how often are we reluctant to do this basic thing? I've been really bad at this
- Rest in a soft, lush, pasture – think about how spring grass feels under your feet.
- Water is readily available for whatever we need. After the ice and lack of water we certainly are not taking it for granted.
- After these basic physical needs are met God meets our spiritual needs of a restore soul. Did you catch that rest is at the root of restore?

- When we face death we do not have to be afraid. Why?
 - God is with us and will protect us.
- Our bodies, minds & souls are cared for and then God offers reconciliation.
 - God not only feeds us at the table but offers us the ability to break bread with those we are estranged from. We don't do this alone but with God and at God's table.
 - Iceberg?
- After we've been reconciled, God anoints our heads with oil, remember how great lotion feels when your skin is dry or chapped.
- Our cups are not just full, but overflowing.
- Finally God, the Good Shepherd promises that Goodness & mercy shall follow, how when we follow God and dwell forever with him.

God is promises to meet our needs, if we surrender ourselves to God's way. I think the surrender is what is so hard for us. We are raised to be independent, to take care of ourselves and our family. We celebrate and wear as a badge of honor, how much vacation time we've banked and not used. We run ourselves ragged going from crisis to crisis. We must surrender so that we can hear God's voice. We must surrender so we can be restore, not just to our own health, but to be reconciled with each other.

This past year has been so difficult. Not just because of the pandemic, but because of the political, racial and social divisions that are constantly around us. Do you know what, we are all wrong. Every single one of us and that wrongness doesn't keep God from loving us. In fact, God loves us

because we are wrong. The only way we can accept the grace of goodness and mercy that is offered, is to surrender to God. God provides so we have our needs met. God provides so we are rested and restored. God provides so we are fearless. God provides so we are comforted. God provides so we are reconciled. God provides so we are anointed. God provides so we live in God's house, filled with goodness and mercy. God knows us, do we know God, the Good Shepherd. May we surrender to the Good Shepherd as we live our lives as God directs, so that we are transformed and others experience the truth of the Gospel. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.