

## **“The Good Shepherd”**

**Psalm 23; John 10:1-10**

April 30, 2023

People that know me, know that I'm a huge Braves fan. In all honesty, I love baseball more than any other sport. A lot of that is because of all the sports available to play, I was probably the best at playing baseball. Not that I was great, mind you. But I was decent and enjoyed playing. When I was playing youth ball, I was fortunate enough to have the same set of coaches for about three seasons. They were good men, good leaders and as a result, we were a good team. Always in contention, we won far more games than we lost. I'll never forget the third year I was on the team, one of the coaches, Mr. Halberstadt, came over to me with a serious look on his face. "Son," he said, "we're going to need you to play catcher this year." I was crestfallen. I'd been playing third base ever since I started playing baseball and I didn't want to change now. Worse, catchers were still thought of as being weak players overall. That was a relic of t-ball and machine pitch where catchers didn't really do that much. Long story short, I didn't want to play catcher. But it was the third year of being coached by these guys. I trusted them. Moreover, I wanted the team to win and figured that the coaches knew best. So, I played catcher. Loved it as it would turn out. It was the position I was playing when I played my last game of youth sports. And it would've never happened had it not been for a group of coaches who were good leaders.

Good leadership is an important thing, is it not? After all, there are entire courses, books, seminars and other things, all purporting on how to train the best leaders. But what makes a good leader? Better still, what are the signs of bad leaders and how do they make tasks unbearable.

I'm a big fan of a miniseries that ran on HBO over a decade ago called, "Band of Brothers." In Band of Brothers, you're brought face-to-face with an army airborne unit that would have a decisive impact on World War II. Their commanding officer for most of the adventures is a man by the name of Lieutenant Winters. Winters is a great leader. Firm but empathetic. Direct but not a jerk about it. Just a good guy that is put in charge of a larger group. One of the things that he does best, which is really talked about more in the book than on the show, is that he leads from the front. That is, he doesn't just send others to be at the very front lines but, instead, leads from that position himself. It can really bond someone to a leader when they know that the leader isn't all about looking out for themselves and is willing to participate in the activities, they're asking their underlings to perform. Lieutenant Winters is just such a guy. Winters had a good model for leadership himself in real life. In real life, Lieutenant Winters was a very Godly man. Grew up in a church and attended one all the days of his life. And the example of leadership he encountered in Jesus Christ was stellar.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of a leader, leading from the front. Not content to watch us in the misery of sin from outside of creation, in the fullness of time, Jesus Christ takes on flesh through the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and becomes human. Fully and completely human so that he can rectify what we've gotten wrong. What we've gotten wrong is that we are mired in sin. When we should be glorifying God, we instead choose darker paths, ones that lead us not only away from Him but, in the process, from goodness and from decency as well.

The Biblical declaration is that we are all sinners. Romans 3:23 is the verse that gets us there directly – *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* Which means in a way that we're all bozos on the same bus. No matter how much we like to differentiate ourselves from everyone else, there is one unifying factor in our lives. We are all sinners. We choose what's wrong over what's right. We leave behind good works in favor of charting our own course in this thing called life. And it kills us. "For the wages of sin is death" that also in Romans. Death and sin go hand in hand. And it makes sense for death is the opposite of life and our life flows from God. As such, we are supposed to be children of the light. But all too often, we find ourselves trading in darkness as opposed to light. Too often we choose sin when a righteous choice is before us.

But Jesus Christ came to change the calculus and the great good news is that we are programmed, in a way, to hear His voice. That's one of the biggest concerns people have sometime. Am I following God, they wonder? They're trying as best they can in this world darkened by sin to just do the right thing. But isn't it good to know that we are His sheep?

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that we read earlier this morning captures the goodness of our Shepherd. Called the Shepherd's Psalm, it is one of the most well-known passages of Scripture in the entire Bible. It speaks of a loving leader, one who stands out for their kindness as well as their care. The Psalm begins with *"The Lord is my Shepherd"* which I want us to hear in a different way this morning. No matter how we may have heard this verse before, I want you to think of it in a new way. You see, it's a boast. *"The Lords is My Shepherd."* Of all the leaders in this world, the psalmist affirms that the Lord is His leader. And what a good leader to have. After all, this is the God who in His loving mercy, created all that we'll ever encounter. From the furthest galaxies to the particles that make up this pulpit, God Himself created every bit of it, sustaining it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But it isn't just that God has created us. No, when you think about it, a creator doesn't necessarily have to be so generous or so involved. Deists, if we'll remember, believed that God created the world and endowed it with certain physical characteristics. Then, boom, God vanished, leaving us to our own devices apart from any help whatsoever. That is not a Biblical understanding of this God because what the Bible says is that not only did God create the world, He remains with His people.

We see this very early on in the Scriptures. By the third chapter, humanity hits a huge stumbling block – temptation. Soon, Adam and Eve have transgressed against the only rule they were given. At that point, God had a big choice. He could've destroyed this wicked creation. I think I would understand that.

Some bosses are tough, aren't they? Back when I was a chef, I was a pretty tough boss as hard as that might be to believe. One of my cardinal rules was don't be late on the first day of work. My policy was to let go of anyone who showed up late on the first day. I figured that if a person was going to be late on the very first day of their new job, chances were that they'd be late more often than not. So, I'd get rid of them. Like I said, I was sometimes a rather harsh boss. Good thing it wasn't me, right?

When Adam and Eve do the very thing they were told not to do, God could've very easily wiped out His creation and started over. He didn't. Instead, He travelled with them East of Eden. And, the Scriptures teach us, in the fullness of time, God sent His Son into the world. Not to condemn the world but to save it.

And boy, did Jesus lead from the front, so to speak. He took on flesh and a human body. Not only that, Jesus came to reconcile us back into a full relationship with God. In order to do that, Jesus a perfectly sinless man, took upon Himself a guilty verdict for us and for our salvation. That's right. Jesus, a perfectly sinless man led a perfectly sinless life in order to do what we could not. And then, Jesus took on Himself the punishment for all the sin of the world. *"He Himself bore our sins on His body on the cross that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds we've been healed."*

And now, Jesus Himself stands as our Good Shepherd, the One who's voice we hear and respond to. How well are we hearing that voice? The book of James teaches us that God will draw near to us if we draw near to Him. So, I wonder again, how well are we hearing His voice?

One of the big questions I get as a pastor is "how to I strengthen my relationship with Jesus Christ." The answer I give is pretty common, I think and it's pretty simple. Spend time with Him. But what does that mean? After all, Jesus isn't here in the flesh. We can't call Him up and invite Him out to dinner with the expectation of being joined by Him. But there are things we can do.

First, we can pray. "Pray without ceasing" that's an admonition from Paul in Thessalonians. And what it puts the spotlight on is that, as Christians, as sheep of the flock, we are to be in prayer frequently. Are you?

We get so much wrong about prayer, I'm afraid. We believe if we don't say the right words or express enough gratitude that somehow, God won't hear our prayers. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, how we pray isn't nearly as important as that we pray. You can be in your car just as easily as you can be on your knees in a prayer room. God is going to hear you wherever you are.

In the Gospel of John Jesus Christ calls us friends and that's how we ought to consider praying to God sometimes. Sure, there are occasions where formality is best, but for the most part, praying should be like a common conversation that you'd have with your closest friends. Don't hold anything

back. To begin with, God knows your heart already so it isn't the case that you'll be hiding anything from Him by staying silent. No, give Him all of you, the worries and the fears, the joys and the triumphs, the pains and the pleasures. Hold nothing back from the Lord as you pray. Prayer is one way that you can enhance your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Another great way to increase your relationship with Jesus Christ is to be in the Word. The statistics on Christians reading the Bible are fairly depressing so I won't sit up here and cite them to you. Just know that, statistically speaking, not many of you are reading your Bibles with anything approaching regularity. And I say that not to get on your case. It isn't the case that I want you to feel guilty because I don't. I want you to be inspired.

Let's be honest... The Bible is a difficult nut to crack, I'm not going to lie. Reading the first couple of books isn't too bad but then you hit Leviticus and the next thing you know you feel like you're reading about every single skin disease in the ancient near east. To make matters worse, the prophets can be confusing and repetitive if you don't know what you're reading. That is to say that "reading the Bible" is more difficult than picking up a copy of your favorite magazine to read. But it is doable and it is sure to enhance your relationship with Jesus Christ. Because what Jesus tells us in this passage is that His sheep will hear His voice. And the clearest channel, if you will, the surest-fire way to hear the voice of God is to encounter it by the power of the Holy Spirit within the words of the Bible.

The last pastor I worked for, talked about being a CEO Christian for many years. Y'all know what a CEO Christian is, right? Christmas and Easter Only is the acronym. So, anyway, she was a CEO Christian but then she gets diagnosed with cancer. She said the diagnosis scared her badly. She was a younger woman at the time with elementary aged children. She said there was lots of fear swirling around her mind, she could hardly sleep. As a matter of fact, she got to waking up at 2am in the morning every night and, with the fear and the worry, she couldn't get back to sleep. She said she started reading the Bible one night so much looking for spiritual guidance but rather looking for something to do with the hours of her fear-based insomnia. But, as it often does, something happened. As she read the pages of the Word, she began to know more about her God. And what she read, she liked. Soon, she says, she looked forward to her 2am wake up because she looked forward to spending time with Jesus in the Word.

This can happen to you, too, of course, and you don't really need to get a cancer diagnosis to see it happen. Instead, book time with yourself to read the Word. That is to say, mark it on your calendars. Make it a habit. Begin with the Gospels and move forward from there. If you want more suggestions on how to read the Bible, speak to me after church or, better still, join us next week for Bible study at 6pm on Sunday night.

Because then you'll be hearing your Leader's voice. Hearing the One that has acted to save you from yourself. Follow the leader, do you remember that game? Well, in this life, following Jesus as our Leader is the best strategy of all.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.