

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Rev. Gail L. Miller, Pastor

May 3, 2009    Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Good Shepherd Sunday

John 10:11-18

## **Life in the Flock**

Just outside of Bethlehem is a place called “The Shepherd’s Field.” It is the spot where, tradition says, the shepherds watched their flocks the night Jesus was born. Rolling bare hills surround the fields; stone walls divide the land. Some of the fields have old stone buildings on them. Flocks of sheep and goats dot the landscape.

A friend of mine was traveling over there and recalls that when they were visiting the Shepherd’s Field, they saw an Arab boy, a shepherd, walking along a path by a stone wall holding a black and gray coat lamb. The perfect biblical, pastoral scene!

But that is a pastoral setting worlds away from busy America with our noisy car-filled streets and machine-filled lives. Our daily lives have no frame of reference for sheep, shepherds, and life in caves.

But in the Middle East sheep were all over the countryside. There are more than 500 references to sheep in the Bible. In fact, the sheep business was a pillar of Israel’s economy representing the chief wealth and total livelihood of pastoral peoples, providing food to eat, milk to drink, wool for making cloth and tents. It was a common point of reference; Jesus’ world was full of sheep and shepherds and so he talked about them frequently.

Once he told a story about a shepherd who lost a lamb and spent all night looking for it. That’s a wonderful picture of God and the Kingdom of his Son. In our scripture lesson for today, Jesus says he is “The Good Shepherd.” It is an image of Jesus loved by Christians around the world and through the ages. Jesus holding a lamb, sort of like that Arab boy outside Bethlehem, fills hundreds of stained glass windows in churches and many children’s Sunday School books.

And that tender picture is fleshed out in everyone’s favorite Psalm, the 23<sup>rd</sup>. What wonderful and familiar words: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....” Who has not been comforted, even sustained, by that powerful image. We read it at funerals and in the hospital. We cling to it in our darkest hours, and we will sing it after the sermon this morning.

Truly, “he restoreth my soul....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.”

But look carefully at that picture. The stained glass window and children's books don't tell the whole story. This is not merely tender, nor even sentimental. Psalm 23 goes far wider and deeper than lambs in the arms of a kindly shepherd.

Sheep herding was a tough job and required a special kind of person. King David was a shepherd before he was King of Israel. Don't let his 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm fool you; he was one tough character.

Remember, when he was a teenager, he volunteered to take on the warrior Goliath. He was sure he could whip a professional soldier while King Saul was quite certain this amateur, this boy, couldn't take on the giant Goliath. David reminded Saul that he was a shepherd. He'd taken on lions and bears and killed them with his bare hands. Shepherds, you see, have to be strong and brave. You can't spend too much of your time holding little lambs in your arms when predators are on the loose.

In the valley of the shadow of death, when the predators threaten life itself, David fears no evil, because his shepherd is with him. "His rod and staff comfort me" David writes. Those are the weapons of the shepherd. The gravest danger, the most frightening moment, is eased because the shepherd is there, weapons in hand, to protect us.

Be sure to make the shepherd in the stained glass window strong enough to save and bold enough to protect.

People in the world of the Bible understood that. Kings were often called "shepherds." Their job was to protect the people in their care and to lead them. The image is of a powerful, caring leadership. Interestingly, in Psalm 23, the king is not our shepherd. God is the shepherd of Israel.

However, in the New Testament, Jesus is the shepherd. Jesus leads, protects and cares for his flock, the church. Only once in the entire New Testament is a leader in the church referred to as "shepherd," the English word "pastor," and that is with the qualifying word "teacher" added (Eph. 4:11). The shepherd image is reserved for Christ, the Lord of the Church.

And the image is tender, certainly, but also strong. Christ the Lord is the one who is truly capable of shepherding his church.

"I am the good shepherd," he says. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:11, 14-15).

God knows we need a shepherd. Life is at stake. Just as sheep need a shepherd to survive; God made us with a deep need for the Good Shepherd in our lives as well. He can do something about our very human needs. In fact, he gives his life for us and in doing so he makes our lives abundant and full lives.

The Good Shepherd comes to those who know they need him and ask. And that's when real life starts. We need a good shepherd, strong enough to fix our broken lives and transform our backwards society.

We need the Good Shepherd in our world and in our souls. The one in the stained glass window and the children's books is not enough. Jesus is not about petting sweet little lambs. He is about changing lives and cultures. We need a Good Shepherd who loves us enough to want to do something about us and for us; who gives us his own life.

Another important point of this text is that he doesn't speak of a single lamb. This isn't just about individuals. Jesus talks about his flock; it's always his sheep in the plural. And he is careful to note that it is one flock, not many. Even when he talks about going to other sheep pens, it is in order to bring them to the one flock.

The Good Shepherd is big enough to have millions and millions of sheep in his arms – all at the same time even! He's got the whole flock there. And there it is safe - there in Jesus' arms. Later in chapter 10, Jesus says that no one can snatch his sheep from his hand because his father's hand is over his hand, as even more protection (John 10:28-29).

Real life, life to the full is life in the flock! Life with Jesus here and now and in the future is meant to be a shared life. That's why the Christian life in the New Testament is inconceivable apart from the living church of Christ.

And this is still no pretty Sunday School picture book, because sheep pens can be pretty messy and sheep can spend a lot of time making a lot of noise. But remember, there is no sheep life without the flock. And there is no flock with out the Good Shepherd leading and protecting us, holding the whole mess of us in his arms.

There is enormous strength and healing in flocks. God made us that way. Families were the norm from the beginning. Sure they can get pretty messy, but they are necessary. That's life in the flock – it is natural and it is necessary.

The Chosen People of the Old Testament were also like that – a people, lots and lots of them with lots and lots of problems. In fact, Moses was spending so much time listening to their troubles he had to hire assistants. Biblical Law is all about living together as God's people. In fact, half of the Ten Commandments are how to treat people in the flock.

Jesus called together a group of disciples. It was an inner circle of 12 and a larger crowd of more than 100. Their life was communal as well. Human beings need a flock as well as a shepherd. It seems we know that instinctively. Most of us prefer to do things with others. We need and make friends. We like group activities. We long for someone with whom to share our soul, all of it, from the flock need God puts in us.

Flock life is not some abstract ideal, some invisible church out there where everybody smiles and nobody hurts. It is flesh and blood people. It is as simple as friends and as deep as changed lives.

There is a photo on the wall of my office, which is a moment in a larger scene in which a shepherd is taking his flock from one mountainside to another. In between is a swift, cold mountain river with a rocky shore and bottom. The shepherd leads the sheep to the edge and they do not want to go in. So what he does is take them one by one and helps them into the river. And

then once the last one is in, he himself steps into the cold rocky river and walks through it so that he can lead them on the other side.

We have a Good Shepherd who protects us from harm, carries us when we're hurt and broken, and leads us to safety. And our Good Shepherd is THE Good Shepherd because he does this by laying down his life for us. All we need to do is listen for his voice, follow his lead and live in his love. Amen.