

"I Shall Not Want" A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
April 22, 2018 Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10:11-18

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

Look at these pictures from our trip to Ireland and Scotland in 2013. Just about every where we went in the countryside we saw sheep. As I drove, I had to be careful because there were areas where the sheep roamed free. I didn't want to kill one of the sweet, fluffy, wooly ones. Something else we learned on the trip. There are brown sheep in addition to white and black sheep.

There are many places in the Bible referring to sheep – in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. We know that sheep are docile and kind of dumb. It seems that after centuries of domestication they have lost their instincts to defend themselves. When a wolf or a lion or a coyote gets into the flock, the sheep are incapable of defending themselves – either individually or as a group. Today, some shepherders have tried to give the sheep some help by mixing a few llamas or alpacas in with the sheep. These two animals, the llamas and alpacas, are much tougher than sheep. When they face an adversary, they form protective circles around their young or at least run away. I'm not sure if the sheep, though, are smart enough to follow the llamas' or alpacas' lead.

As we read in the Bible, why in the world would the ancient Israelites relate so many times to such a docile, dumb animal? Perhaps the Israelites recognized their persistent self-destructive tendencies. They failed to listen to the voice of God. They were always wandering away from God, like that one sheep who can't seem to stay with the flock and follow the voice of the shepherd.

Every culture has its own mythical image of itself, usually drawn from some romantic past. The mild, unruffable British will always be the noble knights of the Round Table; the tan-less, fish-loving Scandinavians are secretly blood-thirsty Vikings; and the suburban couch-potato American is the eternal free-spirited cowboy. But no one except the Israelites voluntarily calls attention to the woolly coats and cloven hooves that reveal our true identity as God/Christ-followers -- sheep.

Being sheep? Not something most people in our culture would admit to. But, the Israelites proclaimed their dependence on a good shepherd -- a leader who could protect them from the dangers around them. As I read in today's scripture, the shepherd's job – protect the flock from predators, wolves, thieves and bandits. Protecting the flock is the shepherd's job, not the job of docile and dumb and defenseless sheep. The flock is best served by doing what sheep do best - staying

close by their shepherd, following the shepherd's direction and staying under the shepherd's watchful eyes.

Sheep. Do you consider yourself to be a sheep or do you think of yourself as a much more independent sort like the llamas or the alpacas? If you're like most people today, you probably do not see yourself as a dumb and defenseless sheep that needs protection. I can take care of myself quite well. Thank you! Remember, we're cowboys, not sheep. When we're threatened, when danger approaches, it's not our nature to stand back and let the shepherd take care of things. No, we want to answer the door with six guns blazing! However, in these words from Jesus, if we want to follow Jesus, we are the sheep and he is the shepherd.

Most of us love the 23rd Psalm. The words are so comforting. The Psalm makes the life of a sheep and shepherd seem so idyllic. The shepherd leads us by the still waters and all is provided for the sheep. But that isn't a true picture of the real life of the shepherd, the sheep maybe, but not the shepherd. Shepherding wasn't an easy job. It was dangerous, menial labor. The shepherd wasn't praised or held in high esteem for the job they did. They didn't fit into polite society. In fact, the job of the shepherd was looked down upon in Jesus' day. So, for Jesus to say he was the good shepherd, when he was supposed to be a leader, was an affront to the religious elite. A shepherd, a nobody, was leading the people of Israel? If Jesus were to make a similar statement today that just might have the same impact in our society, he might say, "I am the good migrant worker."

Speaking of affronts to the religious elite, Jesus' comment about the hired hands who did not care for the sheep but ran away at the first sign of danger, was also an affront to the religious elite and echoes Old Testament prophets' criticism of religious leaders who neglected the people.

So, what are we in 2018 to make of these verses from John? Most of us don't really have any experience with sheep except for what we hear and read. Many of us are not sure we want to be seen as dumb and defenseless sheep. What then, is our take away?

There are two ideas in this scripture I'd like for us to focus on and consider. Just try them on for size. Consider how they fit with your idea of Jesus as the good shepherd. Both are in verse 16: **I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**

Let's look first at Jesus' words, "they will listen to my voice." Sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd and follow that voice. Whose voice are you following? We have many voices contending for our attention. Which ones are you listening to? Ads, opinions and editorials on the Web, television, radio and magazines; friends, family, and politicians; Facebook and Twitter – just to name a few.

These voices only distract us from following Jesus. They lure us from the flock, from the sheep that are protected by Jesus. Jesus says he will never let us go. We belong to him. Those are strong words, comforting words, as each of us struggle to be faithful to Jesus' voice in our world where there are so many distracting voices. When we strive to be faithful and follow Jesus each day, we say yes to some voices and no to others. Let's keep in mind that Jesus promises to be there going before us and leading us into paths that are safe and secure. What a comforting promise. Listen to Jesus' voice.

The second part of verse 16 I'd like to address relates Jesus' words about bringing into his care those that do not belong to the existing herd of sheep. Jesus desires one flock taken care of by one shepherd. If you take the flock to mean those who believe in Jesus and follow his voice, then these words demonstrate Jesus' and God's desire to be inclusive and open. Jesus certainly didn't exclude people in his day that didn't measure up to society's standards as acceptable in polite society. Jesus wasn't concerned about a person's status or family connections or the nationality of the individual. He healed the blind and the leper who were outcasts. Jesus embraced the outcasts, the oppressed, those that society overlooked. Obviously, Jesus was not looking for sameness, for groupings of like people. He loved and touched everyone.

It's Jesus' job to gather the flock. It's our job to make space in the flock for everyone, no exceptions. It's our job to provide a welcoming community where people can become a part of the flock, Jesus' flock. We are all sheep among sheep. All of us are in need of the care and guidance Jesus provides. All of us need to be a part of the flock, not wandering off, lured by other voices.

Think about whose voice you are listening to? Who is your shepherd? I pray that it is Jesus 100%. There are many advantages to having Jesus as your shepherd - and they are listed in detail in the 23rd Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Did you catch the first few words of the 23rd Psalm? **The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.** Did you hear the words, **I shall not want?** Yes, Jesus provides all you need. Listen to his voice and follow him.