

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church  
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### **“Who Needs a Shepherd These Days, Anyway?”**

John 10:1-18

I think I am right in saying, that the most common house-hold pets in the world are dogs and cats. I mean, how many of YOU have at least one dog? (Raise your hand). And how many of you have at least one cat? And, how many of you have both? Of course, hamsters and fish also are popular; while snakes and chimpanzee are at the opposite end of the preferred-pet chain. Yes, dogs and cats are by far the most common and beloved pets. And they HAVE been, for thousands of years.

But, pets don't all react the same way, do they? I mean, you can call a cat til you are “blue in the face”, and it will come ONLY when it is good and ready. Most of us used to watch the TV commercial featuring “Morris the cat”, which made someone very rich, just by showing us that cats can be very “finicky”.

Now, dogs are different! You can rough-house a dog, yell at him, lock him up in the garage - but then, call him by name, and he will come running up to you - tail wagging, tongue licking, jumping up all over you, in giddy abandon! (You can tell MY preference between dogs and cats, can't you)! Some psychologists say that other people know a lot about us by whether we own a dog, or a cat. But whichever YOU like best, let me remind you that your pet depends on YOU, to some degree or another, for everything - food, shelter, health-care, affection.... .....basically, for LIFE itself. And so, any pet owner should feel a deep sense of responsibility for any pet one owns, or is responsible for.

Now - all of this is by way of setting the scene for this morning's lesson. In our Gospel reading, Jesus turns to the figures of a shepherd and his sheep, to illustrate His message of who He is, and what He has come to do - and He tells us that by claiming for Himself the title of the Good Shepherd. Now, the O.T. is filled with references to God and God's people being as a Shepherd with His sheep. And by choosing that illustration, Jesus tells us who He is, and what is His mission. Of course, this passage from John's Gospel, is not the only time Jesus pictures Himself in the role of a Shepherd, and/or we as the sheep. In fact, this is one of Jesus' favorite illustrations throughout the four Gospels. But this illustration of Jesus as a Shepherd poses a big question for me, and I wonder if it does for you? It's a question about relevancy! How relevant is this illustration of Jesus for us today? I mean, in today's world, “who really needs a SHEPHERD, anyway?”

Now - in order for us to do all we can to understand the Bible's message, I think this is a very necessary question to ask. WHY? Because most of us do not REALLY know very much about shepherds and sheep. I mean, in our urbanized culture, how many of us have ever had the opportunity to see first hand, “an honest-to-goodness” shepherd at work? Oh I don't mean someone who has a few sheep around the farm that he lets out to graze every day, and then puts them back in the pen every night. No - I mean “an honest-to-goodness” SHEPHERD - one who eats, sleeps, and lives with his sheep - a LOT of sheep - out in the wild - for weeks on end.

Until I went to Israel in 1984, I only saw REAL shepherds at work once in my life. It was when several of us were traveling along a road in the Highlands of Scotland - that was in 1954. We were on a small bus, heading for the seacoast to catch a ferry for the Island of Iona, and way up ahead of us, a huge flock of sheep began crossing the road; and by the time we got up there, there were hundreds of sheep all around the bus! At first, my reaction was one of fascination and amazement - but then it became one of impatience, because we wanted to catch that ferry going to the island of Iona! But we were caught in this never-ending mass of sheep, crossing that road.

Later that day - and by the way, we DID make it to the ferry, and we got to Iona, so my anxiety was useless - but later that day I was thinking about all those sheep, and their shepherds, and I found I could not, even in the slightest way, associate the shepherds I saw, with Jesus. I mean, those shepherds had been out in the Highlands of Scotland, with their sheep, for weeks and weeks. Having been away from civilization for that long, they looked like “the wild men of Borneo”. And they certainly were a living commercial for soap and deodorant! And so I thought of this same question that I’m raising this morning: “Is Jesus’ illustration really relevant for our day? I mean, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who needs a shepherd, anyway?”

Now, I’d be willing to bet, (if I were still a betting man), that not many of us know why sheep even need a shepherd. We don’t know very much about sheep, do we? - except, maybe, the high cost of lamb chops. But in Jesus’ day, the illustration of sheep with their shepherd held deep meaning for the people. Being a rural nation, a shepherd and his flock was a common sight, in those days - they were just part of life - a major factor in their economy - and they still are today, although they are a lot more out on “the edge” of society today, then they were in Jesus’ day. I mean, today, shepherds in Israel are more like what in other countries we call “gypsies”! Today the shepherds live in tents - and there is junk and garbage all around their camp-sites, and you can smell them a mile before you ever see them. So, in an industrialized Israel, they have been moved out “to the edges of society.” But in Jesus’ day, when He pointed to Himself, and said, “I am the Good Shepherd, and you are My sheep”, He knew, and the people knew exactly what He was talking about. It was quite different! And let me tell you why.

I’ve learned that sheep are about the most challenged creatures on 4 legs! A sheep cannot see more than a few feet in front of him, and so if left by itself, a sheep cannot find it’s own food - it must be led to where grass and water are available. And so, if left by themselves, sheep will just wander all over the place, and probably starve to death - they must be shown and/or led to water and good pasture.....And then also, because they cannot see very far ahead, someone must keep them safe from dangerous paths, whether along streams, or in deep valleys, or through mountain passes. In other words, even more than our household pets, sheep really have to be cared for. Contrary to the nursery rhyme of “Little Bo Peep”, which says, “leave them alone, and they’ll come home, wagging their tails behind them” - that just isn’t true. By themselves, sheep cannot find their own way

Now - you don’t have to be a rocket scientist to see why Jesus chose this illustration, do you? When Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd, and you are My sheep”, he was not speaking in a literal sense, but in a spiritual sense - and that also includes the meaning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which was our O.T. reading, this morning. Jesus is saying, that as sheep are the most challenged animals on FOUR legs, so from a spiritual point of view, human beings are the most challenged animals on TWO legs! That is, in our spiritual relationship with God, we, too, need someone to lead us. Left to ourselves, we often will stray, and we will stray right into the wolfish jaws of hell! We cannot, by ourselves, find our way “home”. So - we are back to the beginning, asking. “So who needs a Shepherd these days?” Well, now we can say: who else??? WE DO! We need God’s Good Shepherd, to lead us, and care for us! And so now, Jesus’ illustration makes sense, doesn’t it! - a lot of sense. By using this illustration, we learn that Jesus came and taught us about God - and our need for Him as our Savior and Guide - as our Good Shepherd.

But, like always, Jesus did/said more. Jesus also came to give His LIFE for His sheep - that is, Jesus suffered and died - in fact, He became the sacrificial lamb - to show us how far God would go in His care for us - which, of course, is what Holy Week and Easter were all about. AND it is what this TABLE before us reminds us of! And so, the voice of God, through the words and actions of Jesus, comes to OUR day, saying: “Yes. I am STILL the Good Shepherd. I know My sheep and My sheep know Me. I came into the world to SAVE you - YOU who have strayed - YOU who are hungry, and lost. I even became one of you - and to lay down My life - for YOU!”

Now - just so you don’t think sheep are getting a bum’s rap, this morning, let me remind you, that in His illustration, Jesus also said: “My sheep hear My voice - and they know Me, and they follow Me.” You see, as challenged as sheep seem to be, one thing sheep CAN do, is recognize the VOICE, or the “call” of it’s own

shepherd. In fact, it's been shown, that many sheep from different flocks can be placed into a common sheep pen, say, for protection at night. And then at daybreak, the various shepherds simply come and sound their "call", and almost miraculously the sheep separate themselves into their original flocks. They have come to know, and to follow the voice of THEIR shepherd.

So, what does this have to say to OUR day? Well, again, it's not too hard to figure out. There are many voices "out there" - many people calling us - calling for our ATTENTION! And we are tempted to follow this one, or that one. In fact, throughout our history, we have heard many voices, haven't we? For instance, shortly after WW II, in the 1950's, some voices were saying God was dead! - or at least hiding in Argentina. And many followed that voice. Other voices were saying that the Church was NOT the Church of Jesus Christ, but only a human institution. And many followed that voice. Other voices laughed at a God declared to be only a relic of their childhood. Yes, there were many voices calling us, in the 1950's.

Then, in the 1960's, humanity began stepping out in confidence. Through technology and human brain power, all kinds of problems were being solved! Our President challenged our scientific community to put a person on the moon by the end of that decade - and many followed his voice, and that impossible target was hit - perfectly! Far-reaching civil rights legislation was being passed, as well. We were becoming "the great society"! Yes, those were the days - a time when brilliant minds of our nation were being called to stretch as never before. If we needed a solution to almost ANYTHING, humankind found it. When something worked, we used it. If it felt good, we did it! It was an orgy of self-confidence! Humankind could "do all things" through humankind.

Then came November 22, 1963. Our President was assassinated - and that was the needle-jab into the middle of our big balloon. You see, the trouble with hope vested only in human achievement is, that it leads so easily to despair because it is vested in the wrong place! Humanity heeding only it's own voice, is a hope doomed, sooner or later, to failure! Yes, the 50's and 60's were a great celebration of "US"! Remember, it was called the "ME" generation. But those days ended in an almost total fiasco! Our high hopes were dashed to a new low of despair. Even the great dream of people working together, side by side, ended in a nightmare - the young were set against the old; the poor against the rich; females against males, people of color against people of NO color.

Then in the 1970's and '80s, there followed several Middle-East wars; Viet Nam, Watergate, other energy and economic crises; world hunger and homelessness - you name it! Humankind was getting lost, and, like sheep without a shepherd, we were wandering all over the place. The dreams of prior decades shattered into bitterness, anger, and hopelessness. We ended up those days with what one writer called, "a national nervous breakdown".

And I'm sure I don't need to retell what happened in the 90's, or what has been happening in this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century! There still are a lot of voices out there - voices - calling from every direction - promising great things - put your money in these stocks, or buy that house, whether you can afford it or not; believe this about abortion, or maybe that - voices - lots of "calls" for our attention, but again, producing very little of lasting value, for they have been only our own voices.

But perhaps about now, you are asking yourself: "Oh man, Fred - this is depressing! Why did I get out of bed and come here, this morning? I don't need all this doom and gloom! Don't give me despair and hopelessness. Give me some direction! Tell me - tell US how we can get what we really NEED!"

Well my friends, if that is what you are thinking, then I'm glad you got out of bed, and came here, this morning, BECAUSE, even though we may still have to go through the fire, I have GOOD NEWS! And the Good News is, that as Christians, you and I know the end of the story! You ask for realistic hope? You GOT it! You ask for direction? You GOT it! You ask for someone you can follow? You GOT it!, because it is Jesus who said: "I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep hear My voice..... and they follow Me." As the Risen One, HE is the One who fills us with realistic hope. It is He - the One who was dead, and is alive again - who shows us new direction! Because we are His, we are not only filled with hope, but we can become that hope for others. You see, we are much more than bodies, filled with good ideas. We are bodies filled with God's Spirit! - and we are

called to follow the One who fashioned us. We are called to live by the voice of God's Shepherd. We are called to live by God's comfort and sustaining power. We have been created by God, and so we are called to be God's people.

And so, the question is: **Do YOU believe that?** (2X) **I** do! But do YOU? I hope I can get some of you - even ALL of you - to believe that, too. **I** believe we are God's people - that is, God's Easter people. And I believe it in the very depths and recesses of my being, in spite of my faults, in spite of my failures, in spite of my short comings - Why? Because through the Holy Scriptures and the witness of the Church, God has planted this knowledge deep within my soul. In fact, I believe it even when I don't always experience it, or appropriate it. I believe it because Jesus came and did what He was sent to do. Yes, I believe that we are God's Easter people, because as I said a moment ago, **I** know - and YOU know - the end of the story! And in case you've forgotten that end, let me remind you. The end of the story proclaims VICTORY! God wins! VICTORY! God overcomes evil! VICTORY! God overcomes hopelessness and despair - even DEATH itself! Yes -VICTORY - GOD WINS! I believe that - and at this Table You are invited to believe that, too.

And so, my friends, out of all the voices that may be calling you, I am asking you to follow the voice of the Good Shepherd, this morning! Follow Him! For it you do, you will have a rich life, a full life, an abundant life - and you will have it for eternity! Oh I know - God may NOT call us to greatness - but when we heed God's voice - when we get our heads and hearts together - when we place our life, our trust, our very being into God's good hands - then we can see that we DO need a Shepherd in these days, after all! Yes, it is right that Jesus uses this illustration of the Shepherd and His sheep, because it tells us that Jesus came for US!!! And so, because we know the end of the story, WE can say with another shepherd of long ago: "Surely goodness and mercy SHALL follow me ALL the days of my life; and I SHALL dwell in the HOUSE of the Lord, FOREVER! **AMEN!**"