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**Where Are You Going? John 10:1-10**

Why sheep? That's always bothered me. Why do we humans always seem to be called sheep in the Bible? How strange is that? Do you think of yourself as a sheep? We all feel sheepish from time to time - but it strikes me as odd that we are so often referred to as a relatively dumb herd animal.

So, after some thought, here's three ways that we're like sheep. 1. We follow the herd, sometimes when the herd isn't the best thing to be following. 2. We're focused on our own needs - a sheep's major task in life is eating and drinking enough to stay alive; we spend most of our time taking care of ourselves. And, on a positive note: 3. We can be led, when we trust our leader.

In this passage, Jesus is less interested in the shepherd and the business of moving the flocks around than he is about the sheep that are together in the pen, a community's shared pen where a whole village might keep their flocks at certain times of the year, a great way to work

together: one guard, a whole village's sheep, safe and sound within one pen.

When it comes time to go, the guard lets each shepherd in, each sheep knows its shepherd, knows who to follow, and gathers together into its flock.

How does this relate to us? Well, to flesh out Jesus' analogy, we humans are in a sort of pen, our daily routines, our comfort zones, our lives. Where we're safe. We're pretty content in the pen, too, with all those others who may not be in our flock, but are, after all, still like us. Still, we have to leave sometimes. And at the right time, our shepherds get recognized by the gatekeeper, and each flock gathers around their shepherd to be led and fed.

But outside the pen, things can go wrong. Perhaps the flock loses trust in their shepherd, gets spooked; maybe they spy what seems like good fodder along the way and go off for a closer look, if the shepherd isn't paying attention. They stray. One of the joys and curses of being a human being is that we can choose what we *think* we need - and that's where trends come from, whether in fashion or music or what have you. But the question has to be, is the herd's choice the best? Does the shepherd agree? After all, the shepherd is expected to be looking after the best interest of that flock. There are many flocks, remember – just the one gate they all use.

And, like sheep, we're also focused on our own needs - or can be, if we're not careful. What is it *I* want? What do I think *I* need? That's how sheep get separated from the herd - they see something that seems special and desirable, and off they go – assuming, perhaps without actually thinking about it, that the shepherd will come and find them.

Still, one strength that we share with our woolly friends is that we *can be led*. We *can be* convinced to follow the right path, if we have enough trust that the shepherd and the rest of the flock are going to lead us where we need to be in the end, to just the right spot.

There is a problem with all this shepherd talk, of course: Jesus is not talking about his shepherd role here in John 10. While he calls himself the Good Shepherd in other places, here he is the guard, even the gate itself, who allows the sheep to leave only with the right shepherd.

Diane, in her powerful message last week, talked about the scars that the resurrected Jesus still carried, and she referred to a passage in Revelation where the visionary sees “a lamb, with the marks of slaughter.” And that reminded me of the passage from Handel’s Messiah, also from Revelation, in the KJV: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing... Blessing and honor, glory, and power be unto him who sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb forever and ever.” (Rev. 5:12-13 *passim*)

So. We may be like sheep, but Jesus - greater than any mortal because he is God's son as well as a human - is not even a sheep, but a lamb, an immature, innocent youngster that *follows its mother* as she follows the shepherd. And it is that innocence, that dependence – ultimate dependence, you could say, as part of the Trinity – that made him the perfect sacrifice for our sheepishness: our wayward, self-involved, herd-driven ways.

Now, most religions have priests – a person who is supposed to relate directly to the deity, someone who stands between, who intercedes for the mass of people and God. Back in the beginnings of the Bible, God spoke and worked directly with people, but during the Exodus, God seemed so remote, so fearsome, so overwhelmingly *other* that God scared the willies out of them, and the people begged Moses to do their meeting with God for them, and Moses did just that.

But in one of the clearest differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, we believe that that Lamb itself, Jesus himself, has become forever the only high priest humanity needs, as the Letter to the Hebrews says so strongly, and so we do not need to go through another human being to speak with, plead with, complain to God. We are all priests, we can all do it on our own, through Jesus Christ. We, your pastors, are Teaching Elders, not priests – but you, yourself are.

But then, how did we get here, in this “pen,” this sanctuary, with this flock? Here is where the Good Shepherd part comes back in.

When I was in Sunday School back in the last millennium, one of the images that caught me most - probably the one I could best picture in my mind - was of the lost sheep, the one who saw something that looked worth investigating off to one side, and got so caught up in it that it managed to lose touch with the rest of the flock. It certainly didn't mean to; after all, sheep, domesticated sheep, are not solitary animals. (Nor are we, for that matter.)

This sheep managed to climb (in my mind) up a rocky hillside, and in way over his wooly head. It's maybe a little battered and bruised from the climb, definitely anxious and feeling alone, perhaps caught in a cleft or injured.

And in my mind, I saw the shepherd, Jesus, come over the crest of that rocky hill, his questing eyes searching for sheep-sign, his ears open for the faintest bleat. Suddenly, he spies his missing charge, and with a grin and enormous relief, walks gently but full of purpose up to the critter who has caused him so much trouble, rubs its muzzle, strokes its flank, and, bending down, picks it up and puts it across his shoulder, relieved to find his missing sheep even though the trip back to the rest of the flock is going to be a lot harder than the way up, what with that sheep on his back and all.

I never thought much back then about what the sheep felt. Relief, I'm sure - even if it ran off on purpose, it was not meant to be alone in a world of danger and predators, and if it was truly just a stupid distraction

that got it off the track of the rest, well, the relief had to be enormous, because at last, its savior had come, the one that it and all the other sheep trusted to keep them safe, fed, watered, and together.

So, back to us, here, now: what is important isn't so much how you got here, in this place: it's what happens next. Are you willing to let the gatekeeper release you into the care of your shepherds, and be guided in the way, led to food and water, rescued from random wanderings, protected from dangerous predators?

Where are you going? Are you going with the flock led by the shepherd, with the flock wherever they go, stay in the pen, or go off on your own?

Here we are, this particular flock, in its particular place. Oh, of course, many of our number are spread all over the world right now, but that doesn't mean they're any less a part of our flock.

Some of you may have got into this flock because you were looking for a shepherd. Some, because you were looking for the companionship of a flock. Some because you wanted to see the inside of the building, hear this amazing music, worship the God who made you - some of you even snuck over from other flocks, or were just tired of trying to make it on your own. It really doesn't matter how you ended up here - that was up to God, though we may well think that we had something to do with it.

It doesn't matter at all how you got here this morning. Not at all. It was God's doing, so what *does* matter is that you are a part of this flock right now, and I pray that in all this, you will realize that it's more than chance that you're here, and that Jesus is ready to keep you safe, fed, watered, and give you rest and peace. All we have to do is worship and serve him. His flock is far more than just us, of course; but he guards the community's sheep, God's community of the baptized, and lets us come and go in safety to the care of the community's shepherds and the flocks they themselves tend.

In the end, we all got here the same way: on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd. You are here on purpose, for a purpose. You are God's, and Jesus stands guard to keep your soul from harm. What more can any of us ask? Except, perhaps, are you going off on your own, or with us?