

# JESUS' MIXED METAPHOR?

Sermon, May 7, 2017

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-12; John 10:1-15; Psalm 23

As mentioned last week, in the days before electricity, people tended to stay put when it got dark. They rarely went out; they even more rarely traveled. You'll remember it was the approaching nightfall that prompted two forlorn travelers on the road to Emmaus to invite their walking companion to join them: *"Stay with us, because it is nearly evening and the day is almost over."* As darkness approached in that pre-electric world, there were dangers that came with it. No one knew this better than the Palestinian shepherds of the first century. Under cover of darkness any stray sheep was potential fast food for all sorts of hungry hunters; the sheep were vulnerable to the predations of four-legged prowlers as well as two-legged poachers. These dark, unlit hills and valleys of the Palestinian countryside really were the *"valley of the shadow of death"* for these vulnerable creatures. Having sheep come together into the sheepfold for safety during the night was essential for their survival; there they would be safe all nuzzled together and sleeping soundly under the watchful, attentive care of the shepherd.

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus is describing a typical sheep pen of the times. A typical nighttime pen out in the Palestinian hills would be a makeshift corral constructed from available stones or hedges of thorns in the shape of a large "C," with the open end of the "C" being the opening through which the sheep entered the safety of the pen one at a time. After the sheep were safely gathered within, the shepherd would then lay down across the opening; he would literally become the "gate" or the "door" as he "lay down his life" for the sheep. Hence, you see that the apparent mixed metaphor of Jesus saying He is both the Good Shepherd and the Gate isn't really a mixed metaphor at all; the Palestinian readers of this text would certainly understand the imagery of a shepherd being a gate ...of course, shepherds are the gateway to the fold, especially at night ... but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit.

I'm told that in those days a shepherd usually carried two special pieces of equipment, (1) a rod and (2) a staff. Like many of you who are familiar with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, I once thought these were just two words for the same thing, but they are two very separate instruments. The rod was a short club with a heavy knob at the end; interestingly, this was also a standard issue weapon carried by Roman foot soldiers. The rod was a defensive weapon for the shepherd to use against wild animals or marauders or thieves ... but at times during the day it would also be used on the sheep, but only in way of a gentle warning. Sheep are notorious for literally letting their mouths lead them into all kinds of trouble (*like a lot of people I know*); they will just nibble and eat and let their bodies go wherever their mouths lead them. They'd even fall off cliffs or get hopelessly entangled in thorn hedges as they semi-blindly nibbled away at whatever their mouths could find, always looking down for more, not up. The shepherd would fling the rod just ahead of a straying sheep, so that the knob end of the rod would land with a resounding THUMP on the ground just in front of the sheep's nose as it nibbled; the thump would scare and startle the sheep back into the fold. A good shepherd would become quite adept at aiming and flinging the rod just ahead of the sheep; a bad shepherd would wind up bonking the poor sheep on the noggin.

The other instrument carried by the shepherd was the familiar shepherd's staff, a long stick curved at the end, which was used to guide sheep and, if necessary, to hook them and pull them back when they begin to stray. The rod and the staff were both tools of gentle discipline to keep sheep safe, protected, out of danger. King David, who wrote Psalm 23, was a shepherd before he was a king, and he also knew what it meant to be guided, restored and disciplined by the Lord his good Shepherd. *"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."* Note that David did not write, *"Thy rod and Thy staff, they punish me."* No, David found great comfort in being under the protective care and guidance of a loving, attentive, divine Shepherd Who used whatever means and tools He had at His disposal to help keep His sheep safe, protected and on the right paths, even when (*and perhaps especially when*) dark times fell.

Another function of the shepherd's rod was to examine and count the sheep. This is referred to as "passing under the rod" (*see Ezekiel 20:37*). As each animal would come to the pen, it would be stopped by the shepherd's outstretched rod, held against the sheep's head. With his free arm the shepherd would then comb through the fleece, running his skillful hand over the sheep's body, feeling for any sign of trouble in the long, tangled wool where disease, wounds, parasites and assorted defects might hide that would harm the animal if left unchecked. A sheep that passed "under the rod" was a sheep that had been thoroughly looked over and checked out with great care and loving attention. Then, as mentioned earlier, when the sheep were examined and safely in the pen for the night, the shepherd would lie down across the opening, as there was no physical door. The good shepherd would literally become the gate, laying down his body to protect the sheep.

Again, Jesus' words: *"I am the gate, whoever enters through Me will be safe, he will come in and go out and find pasture." "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."*

Now, if the Shepherd is the Gate, that means nothing is to come inside the corral that cannot pass through Him. Nothing should come in that can't pass under His rod, His muster, His inspection, His scrutiny. Speaking allegorically, if Jesus the Good Shepherd is the Gate into the corral of my heart, that means nothing should get into my heart that cannot pass through Him. Whatever I am bringing into my life had better be able to pass through Jesus' inspection and approval before it makes its way into my heart! When the Good Shepherd examines us, when He gets below the surface and exposes harmful, parasitic and/or festering things that need to be made right or gotten rid of, He does this with the utmost concern and compassion for our welfare. We shouldn't try to sneak things past Him; to really mix metaphors, we really should not try to pull our wool over His eyes! Our relationships had better be able to pass through Jesus before they make their way into our hearts. Our work ethic, our habits, our amusements, our reading and viewing habits ... they all had better be able to pass through Jesus' scrutiny and examination. Because if something can't pass through the Shepherd's scrutiny and approval, then according to this text that thing is a destroyer, a potential killer, a thief! Jesus said, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."*

I think we all know in our heart of hearts who and what the thieves are in our lives. If you have doubts about who or what the thieves are, just take an honest good hard look at the things or the attitudes or the relationships or the habits that are slowly but surely stealing your life away. If some destructive attitude, some improper relationship, some secret habit, some addiction, or some illicit thing you think you have to do to stay "ahead of the game" or because "that's just who I am," if *whatever* it is really can't pass through the Good Shepherd's gate inspection to the corral of your heart, then that thing is a destructive, parasitic *thief* who wants to come in and steal and kill and destroy a part of who you are! This not only robs you of quality of life, but it also robs those who love you, those who depend on you, those whose lives are affected by your life.

*(The following paragraph was edited out at the second service due to time constraints; I include it here:)*

As I alluded earlier, sheep are notorious for letting their mouths and their appetites lead them into all kinds of trouble ... they follow their mouths and their stomachs to whatever source of food they can find. And in the process of following their appetites, they often wander into trouble. I can't tell you how many times in the course of my thirty-three years of ministry I've heard depressing accounts of disrupted lives and shattered families and scarred relationships that all had their origins in people mindlessly and stupidly and selfishly following their appetites far beyond the bounds of safe pasture *(something, by the way, that has increased exponentially with the growth of the internet. In many respects the internet is a wonderful invention, putting a world of information, data, convenience and communication at our fingertips, but it is also a two edged sword that can cut and cripple and wound very deeply. It must be used responsibly, honorably, ethically and with great care; a good rule of thumb is that if you cannot leave your door to your room wide open while you are on line, then shut off the darn computer!)*. I've mentioned this before when we've looked at this passage, but even some people I looked up to over the years wound up mindlessly followed their appetites far beyond the bounds of safe pasture ... three of whom were pastors I admired, pastors who were in fact directly responsible for my being in the Presbyterian Church (USA) today, largely due to their inspiration and example in pastoral ministry. Now, I don't know all the details, but I know enough to know each of these good men experienced the destruction of wandering appetites wreaking havoc in their marriages and ministries, and adversely *(and perhaps even irreparably)* affecting their loved ones, including their children and grandchildren. Each apparently ignored the repeated "thumps" of their Shepherd's rod along the way until it was much too late ... two were eventually divorced, the other defrocked of his ordination *(after being made a public spectacle in the tabloids of a huge city)*, and none of the three are in pastoral ministry now. Even sheep who should know better can stupidly follow appetites into forbidden pastures and sticky thickets and over dangerous cliffs if they don't constantly heed the Shepherd. *(I've also learned in 33 years of ministry how morality often determines theology, rather than the other way around ... crises of faith usually are rooted in bad moral choices, but that's another sermon)*. The Shepherd wants to lovingly lead us by His rod and staff to the still waters to restore us; He does not want to take us to the roiling waters which only inflame our insatiable appetites. He wants to lead us in the paths of righteousness, not down the meandering, self-absorbed, corrosive and debilitating paths to personal destruction. *(End of excluded paragraph)*

One more thing before closing: You know, since the time of Ezekiel, the metaphor of the Good Shepherd has always been reserved for God Himself. In Ezekiel 34, read at the outset of the worship service, God says through the prophet, *"I myself will search for my sheep and look after them ... and I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I myself will tend My sheep and have them lie down; I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured, I will strengthen the weak, and I will be the shepherd of the sheep."* So when Jesus shows up and starts talking about gathering up the scattered sheep, about calling them by name, about caring for them, about binding up their injured souls, about gathering them together under His protective care especially as the dark shadows fall, it sounded an awful lot like Jesus was saying that He was God.

Which, in fact, is *exactly* what He was saying. He IS God. He is our Good Shepherd. Trust His care, heed His discipline, and willingly trust and subject your lives to His thoroughly loving examination.