

# MANE NOBISCUM

Sermon, May 3, 2020

Texts: Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34:11-16, John 10:7-18

*Luke 24:29 – “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.”*

A quick word about the sermon title, “**Mane Nobiscum**” ... I know during this time of quarantine some of you may be eating too Man-e Nabiscos (*as in cookies*), but that's not what the sermon title means. It is Latin for “*Stay with us*” or “*Abide with us.*” As we read last week, that was what two forlorn travelers on the road to Emmaus said to their walking companion as evening drew near. “*Stay with us, because it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.*” That walking companion accepted the invitation, and “... *he went in to stay with them, and when he was at table with them he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.*” It was then they finally recognized their traveling companion as their resurrected Lord.

About a thousand years after that Emmaus road experience, that simple invitation “**Mane Nobiscum**” would be repeated nightly by monks around the world offering end-of-the-day vesper prayers: “*Mane nobiscum Domine, quoniam advesperascit.*” Which is Latin for “*Stay with us Lord, for the evening falls.*” In the year 1847, Anglican pastor Henry Lyte opened his greatest hymn with the same Mane Nobiscum invitation: “*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.*” Henry Lyte’s body was riddled with tuberculosis at the time, and the dark shadows of the evening of his life were falling. He had actually preached his last sermon a few days before (*and would pass away a few days after*) writing the hymn we will sing following the sermon as our Affirmation of Faith.

As darkness approached in that pre-electric world, it would get really, really dark ... in a world without electricity, people rarely ventured out. There were dangers that came with the darkness. No one knew this better than the first century Palestinian shepherds. As evening fell, the vulnerable and defenseless sheep had to be gathered and guarded. The sheep were vulnerable to the predations of four-legged prowlers and two-legged poachers; under cover of darkness any stray sheep was potential fast food for all sorts of hungry hunters. Having sheep come together into the sheepfold for safety at night was essential for their survival. They would feel safe all nuzzled together and sleep soundly under the watchful, attentive care of the shepherd.



(The following was discussed during the preceding **Time With the Children**) *In those days a shepherd usually carried two special pieces of equipment, (1) a rod and (2) a staff. The rod was a short club with a heavy knob at the end; interestingly, this was also a standard issue weapon carried by Roman soldiers. The rod was a weapon for the shepherd to use against wild animals or marauders or thieves. At times during the day it would also be used by the shepherd on the sheep, but only in way of a gentle warning. Sheep are notorious for letting their mouths lead them into all kinds of trouble (like a lot of people I know); sheep 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 nibbled away always looking down, 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; scaring and startling the sheep back into the fold. A good shepherd was skilled at aiming and flinging the rod just ahead of the sheep, a bad shepherd would sometimes bonk the poor sheep on the noggin. The other instrument carried by the shepherd was the shepherd's staff, a long stick curved at the end, which was used to guide sheep and, if necessary, to hook and pull them back when they began to stray. The rod and the staff were tools of gentle discipline used to keep sheep safe, protected, out of danger. From Psalm 23: "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 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, a shepherd Who used whatever tools He had at His disposal to keep His sheep safe, protected and on the right path, even when (and perhaps especially when) dark times fell. In the second half of our reading Jesus describes a typical night-time sheep pen of the times. A typical sheep pen out in the Palestinian hills would be a makeshift corral constructed from 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. After the sheep were safely gathered, 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.*

Another function of the shepherd's rod not mentioned during the Time With the Children was to help 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 one at a time 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 who had been thoroughly looked over and checked out with great care and loving attention. Then, when all the sheep were examined and safely in the pen for the night, the shepherd would lie down across the opening; the good shepherd would literally become the gate, laying down his life 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.*" Of course, the imagery foreshadowed in Jesus' words about laying down his life is that is what He would literally do by going to the cross (*but that's another sermon*).

Now, if the Shepherd is the Gate, that means nothing is to come inside that cannot pass through Him. Nothing should come in to the safe haven of the pen that can't pass under His rod, His inspection, His scrutiny. Speaking allegorically, as we pastors are prone to do: If Jesus the Shepherd is the Gate into my heart, that means nothing should be allowed to come in 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 clinging to our lives 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; we sheep 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 amusements, our reading and viewing habits ... they all had better be able to pass through Jesus' scrutiny and examination. Because if something trying to get in can't pass the Shepherd's scrutiny and approval, then according to Jesus 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/or 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 bad habit, some addiction ... if *whatever* it is really can't pass through the Good Shepherd's gate inspection before going into 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, who depend on you, those whose lives are affected by your life.

Again, sheep are notorious for letting their mouths and their appetites lead them into all kinds of trouble. They don't stop and look up; they keep following their appetites into bad pasture. I can't tell you how many times in the course of my nearly thirty-six years of ministry I've heard sad and depressing stories of disrupted lives, shattered families, damaged relationships that all had their origins in some person mindlessly and selfishly and stupidly following his/her appetite 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; we're even worshipping via internet today, but it is also a two edged sword that can cut and cripple and wound deeply. It must be used responsibly, honorably, ethically and with great care; a good rule of thumb is that if you cannot leave the door to your room wide open while you are on line, then shut off the darn computer or phone!*) Even some people I looked up to over the years, including a few church shepherds I've respected ... mindlessly followed their appetites far beyond the bounds of safe pasture ... and they experienced the destruction and dissolution of these wandering appetites wreaking havoc in their marriages, their professions, their ministries and adversely (*and perhaps even irreparably*) affecting their loved ones. These are people who apparently ignored the repeated "thumps" of their Shepherd's rod along the way until it was too late. Even sheep who should know better can stupidly follow appetites into forbidden pastures and sticky thickets and over dangerous cliffs if they don't heed their loving Shepherd. The Shepherd wants to gently 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 good paths of righteousness, not down the meandering, self-absorbed, wayward and debilitating paths to personal destruction.

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 His 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, it sounded an awful lot like Jesus was saying that He was God. Which, in fact, is exactly what He was saying.

Jesus *is* God. He *is* the Lord. He is our Good Shepherd.