

Aftermath: The Good Shepherd Leads Us

John 10:1-11

Jesus came to bring us abundant life.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
April 30, 2023

In one of his books, Max Lucado gives an interesting comparison between a cowboy and a shepherd. The cowboy is an American icon, a real hero of the Old West. You can picture him as he sits on his horse at the edge of a canyon and watches the cattle as they mosey along below. He is sunburned and trail-toughened, slow to speak and quick with a gun. He's a real American hero, this cowboy.

Now picture a hero of the Bible: the shepherd. In some ways, the shepherd is like the cowboy: rugged, outdoorsy, always on the watch, content to sleep out under the stars with the howl of wild animals nearby. But that is where the similarities end. The shepherd loves his sheep. The cowboy appreciates his cattle; they are his livelihood. But he doesn't love his cattle. Did you ever see a cowboy hug a cow?

The difference is, the cowboy drives the cows to slaughter. The shepherd merely shears the sheep. The cowboy wants meat; the shepherd wants wool. So they treat their animals differently. The cowboy drives the cattle; the shepherd leads the sheep. The cowpoke wrestles, brands, herds, and ropes. The shepherd protects, feeds, and carries. The cowboy knows the names of the other trail hands; the shepherd knows the names of his sheep. The cowboy whoops and hollers at the cows; the shepherd calls his sheep by name.¹

Aren't we glad the Psalmist didn't say, "*The Lord is my cowboy?*" Aren't we glad Jesus didn't say, "*I am the good cowboy?*" The image of the shepherd is one of the most beloved descriptions of God in the entire Bible. We don't have any shepherds in our congregation. Most of you have never known a shepherd or even seen a sheep up close and personal. None of our young people aspire to be shepherds as a career.

Yet the image of the shepherd still captures our imagination. There are half a dozen references to God as Shepherd in the Book of Psalms, and the New Testament continues the theme with another half dozen or so references. In the Gospels, Jesus self-consciously takes on the role of Shepherd: "*I am the good Shepherd.*"² We have a Good Shepherd who loves us, who knows us by name, who gives his life for us, and who gives us life. In the

Good Shepherd, we find strength, comfort and courage. We find protection and security. We find a love that never fails.

This is good news in the world we live in. Do you ever wonder about the fundamental nature of reality? What kind of world do we have here? Sometimes it seems like the universe is at best indifferent to us, or at worst is out to get us. Death, disease and disaster confront us every day. People can't get along, treating one another with contempt and hostility. Violence is an every day fact of life. What is the character of creation?

I don't believe any of these bad or tragic things reflects the intention of the universe or the attitude of God. I think woven into the very fabric of creation is the love of the Creator. God cares for us. God loves us with an unconditional love. The Good Shepherd cares for his sheep. At the heart of the universe is a heart of love.

Sometimes nature can seem very brutal—harsh conditions, survival of the fittest, that sort of thing. But sometimes you see the heart of creation in some very unusual places. There was a news story several years ago about a herd of elephants in the rural areas of India west of Kolkata. A tiger attacked a baby elephant and nearly killed it on the spot. But the other elephants surrounded the baby and managed to chase the tiger away. Then the elephants did an amazing thing. They knew that some distance down the road, there was a ranger station where human beings could be found. The rangers had been kind to the elephants in the past, so they seemed to know that perhaps these humans could treat the wounded baby elephant and bring it back to health. So slowly but surely, the adult elephants pushed the weak and injured calf down the road toward the ranger station. When they got there, they trumpeted to get the rangers' attention. The rangers administered first aid to the little elephant, doing everything they could to save its life. The older elephants circled around the rangers and the calf and watched.

Despite their best efforts, the little elephant finally died. But then a really astounding thing happened. The older elephants circled around the baby lying still on the ground, raised up their trunks high in the air, and trumpeted a song of sorrow over its body, like a kind of tender elephant funeral service. The rangers reported that the big female elephant who was the mother of the calf had big drops of elephant tears rolling down out of her eyes.³

That's an incredible story, but it tells us that this is not an indifferent universe. Deep down in all creation, even in the brutal realities of nature, there is a connection of caring and compassion between Creator and creation and among all of God's creatures. That's why the shepherd is such a meaningful image for God. The good shepherd cares for the sheep. How can we see that in our own lives?

Because the Good Shepherd cares, he guides us. I think it's very interesting that shepherds get their sheep from one pasture to another not by pushing them, but by leading them. Cowboys drive. Shepherds lead and call the sheep forward. Jesus used this image with his followers: "*The gatekeeper opens the gate for [the shepherd], and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.*"⁴

This is the way it still works in Palestine today. There was a tour group on a tour of the Holy Land, and the guide had just explained how the shepherds in that part of the world still care for their sheep in the ancient way—leading and calling them out to pasture and back to home. The next thing they saw was a Palestinian man driving a flock of sheep from behind, shouting at the sheep, throwing rocks at them, siccing the sheep dog on the

poor animals. It was the opposite of what the guide had just said. It was so unusual, the guide stopped the bus, got out, and asked the man, “Why are you driving these sheep? I thought all the shepherds in this part of the world led their sheep and called them by name.”

The man replied, “You are quite right, sir. The shepherd does lead his sheep. But I’m not the shepherd; I’m the butcher.”⁵

God doesn’t drive; God leads. When we pay attention to the voice of the Shepherd, as the Psalm says, he will lead us to green pastures, not to the slaughterhouse. He will take us to the still waters. He will show us the right paths for our souls.

Thomas Merton, the 20th-century American monk and mystic, wrote a prayer for guidance that has become known as the “Merton prayer.” It’s a great statement of faith, and a prophetic word for our time:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.⁶

We can trust the guidance of the Good Shepherd.

Because the Good Shepherd cares, he guards us. One of the functions of shepherding is to keep the sheep safe. There are wolves and bandits and thieves out there! In the Palestine of Jesus’ time, there were also steep cliffs and crags that were dangerous for a sheep to explore. That’s what the crook of the shepherd’s staff is for—to rescue sheep in danger.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus shifts the image to talk about how the good shepherd would actually become the gate for the sheepfold. In the larger towns with several flocks of sheep, they might have a gate and a gatekeeper. The shepherd would call his sheep by name, separate them from the larger flock and lead them out to pasture. But in the smaller villages or out in the wilderness, they would simply build an enclosure with an opening and gather all the sheep into it at night, and then the shepherd himself would lie down in the doorway, serving as a human gate for the enclosure. No sheep could escape, no predator could enter, no harm would come, as long as the shepherd was there.

Have you ever felt the protection of the Good Shepherd in your life? God is there whenever you are in danger. While serving with the armed forces in Iraq, a young soldier named Courtney Birdsey experienced the protective hand of God, and it changed her life forever. She was part of a crew in a Humvee entering a town just north of Baghdad, when they were caught in an ambush. The Humvee wrecked, and Courtney was nearly run over by another careening vehicle. They fought off the attack, loaded the wounded into the Humvee, and eventually made it to a safe house on the outskirts of the town. Then Courtney, covered in dirt and the blood of the wounded, fell to her knees and thanked God for her safety.

She said, “After this encounter, my faith took on a deeper and more personal perspective. I had felt the protective hand of God as I returned to our base physically unscathed. For my remaining time in Iraq, I began to rely heavily on my constant

communication with God. Praying without ceasing became, for me, as natural as breathing.”⁷ In the midst of the battles of life, the Good Shepherd guards us.

Because the Good Shepherd cares, he guides us, guards us, and gives us life. The personal mission statement of Jesus is found in this passage about the Good Shepherd. He said, “*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*”⁸ The context of this passage comes right after the story of the man born blind. The Pharisees had resisted the healing power of Jesus and the testimony of the man who was healed. Jesus compares the Pharisees to thieves and bandits; he says they come only to steal, kill, and destroy. But the purpose of the Good Shepherd, the purpose of God, is to give us life, even if the Shepherd has to lay down his life for the sheep—which Jesus did. God wants us to have the good life, now and forever. King David, a shepherd himself, climaxed the Shepherd Psalm with these words: “*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.*”⁹ That’s abundant life. God will give us that life if we will give God our permission.

Keith Miller was a best-selling Christian author whose first book, *A Taste of New Wine*, told about his finding the meaning of life. Keith had felt the call of God and had attended seminary, but he had given it up to return to the West Texas oil fields where he grew up. His soul was already in turmoil, and then he discovered that his mother was dying with cancer. One day everything got so bad that Keith got in his company car and took off on a field trip alone. He pulled off the side of the road in despair. His usual optimism had disappeared. He was 27 years old, but he felt like an old man on a great gray treadmill going no place, in a world that was made up of black clouds all around. As he sat there in his car, he began to weep like a little boy. There was nothing he wanted to do with his life. He looked up toward the sky and said, “God, if there’s anything you want in this stinking soul, take it.”

Then Keith Miller shares this testimony:

Something came into my life that day which has never left, a deep intuitive realization of what it was God wanted from me, which I’d never known before. I realized then that it was not just my money or time that God wanted. It occurred to me that He wanted my permission to come into my life and show me how to live creatively and freely in loving relationships with God and people. I realized in that instant that if I’d give my permission, God would begin to show me life as I’d never seen it before! Although I could not articulate for many months what had happened to me, I knew to the core of my soul that I had somehow made intimate contact with the very Meaning of Life.¹⁰

Are you ready to live that kind of life—creative, free, loving, abundant, eternal life? Do you want to live with the security of knowing that you have an intimate connection with the meaning of life? Are you willing today to give permission to God to be your Good Shepherd—to guide you, to guard you, to give you life? God already knows what God wants for you. The future is in your hands.

¹<http://maxlucado.com/pdf/compassion.pdf>.

² John 10:11.

³ <https://www.thedodo.com/elephant-herd-comforts-grievin-918372088.html>.

⁴ John 10:3-4.

⁵ <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/i-m-not-a-shepherd-i-m-a-butcher-davon-huss-sermon-on-elders-187616>.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 79.

⁷ Courtney Birdsey (as told to Julie E. Luekenga), "Prayers in the Desert," *Today's Christian* (May/June 2005), *PreachingToday.com*.

⁸ John 10:10.

⁹ Psalm 23:6.

¹⁰ <https://keithmiller.com/about/>.