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Pentecost 9B, – July 21, 2024

“Sheep Without a Shepherd”

Read: Mark 6:30 – 44 and/or Mem: Mark 6: 34 NLT

Ever gone to a car auction? At some of them they divide the cars into starters and non-starters. On the auction block was a non-starter. It was pretty obvious. It had a shattered windshield, two missing tires, sagging front bumper, cockeyed grill, hood that was sprung up at an angle and many dings and dents all over the body. The auctioneer said the owner wanted everyone to know one thing: the radio doesn't work.

There was a lot more wrong with that car than a broken radio. That's kind of how it is with people. We're more broken than we think, and not even sure how we got that way.

Each week a Lutheran pastor began the service with the words, "The Lord be with you." To which the congregation would reply, "and also with you." One week the microphone wasn't working. As he began the service he said, "This microphone isn't working." To which the congregation responded, "and also with you."

You and I know the truth, although we won't always admit or accept it. There is something wrong with all of us. In our Gospel reading, the disciples are coming back from their first foray into ministry. They want to share their excitement with Jesus, but things are so crazy around Him that they can hardly get His attention. So, He says to them, "Come, let's go away to a quiet place and get some rest."

Except, even as they try to get away, the crowd runs ahead to meet them. When Jesus saw the large crowd, rather than fleeing them, He began to teach them, because "they were like sheep without a shepherd." That was Jesus' reaction to the multitude who were seeking Him. That's quite a description. We are all like "sheep without a shepherd."

Have you ever been saddened by the human condition? God has blessed us with a wonderful world to live in, yet many are touched by what some writers call, the "pathos" of humanity. There is something shared inside of us that is almost pathetic. For all of our pride, all of our knowledge, all of our sophistication, there are areas of our life that are so vulnerable, so uncertain and so insecure.

I'm certain that God sees our condition and has compassion, just as Jesus did, for we remind Him of sheep without a shepherd. We wonder how we might appear to others. For example, sheep are particularly prone to wander. They need a shepherd to watch over them for without that shepherd, they will certainly perish. Might we do the same?

Anybody ever heard of "The Dead Sea Scrolls"? What do you know about them? They are manuscripts that predate by almost 1000 years the oldest manuscripts we had of the Bible. Do you know how they were found? In the mid 1930's, a shepherd boy was looking for lost sheep in the valley near the Dead Sea. There are lots of caves there so the boys would throw rocks into the cave to see if the sheep would scatter out. In this instance, he threw a rock in and heard a crash.

He went in to discover what happened; he found all sorts of clay jars. There were hundreds of sealed pots with well-preserved manuscripts inside. Isn't that kind of classic? A major archaeological find of biblical materials occurred because sheep are prone to wander off.

Of course, sheep are not the only creatures of God that wander off. Every day, in the United States, over 2,300 people go missing. You didn't mishear me I said 2,300 people go missing every day; over 600,000 in a year. Some are displaced by hurricanes and other natural disasters, while others are abducted, often times by a distraught parent or someone else they know.

Some walk away from a home, teenagers run away because they are tired of the abuse and chaos at home. Some people even fake their deaths and others are taken with criminal intent.

Other people lose themselves in other ways. Some choose unsavory companions, some take up risky habits, like snorting cocaine, or other habit-forming substances, some fall victim to violence. But some just seem to wander off, like sheep without a shepherd . . ., perhaps looking for greener pastures. A large number of these have no interest in returning home.

Sir Thomas Beecham, a British conductor, was conducting a rehearsal of Handel's "Messiah". He said to the choir, "When we sing, 'all we like sheep, have gone astray,' might we please have a little more regret and a little less satisfaction?" That's how most lost sheep are today – with little regret and totally satisfied.

Jesus says we are like sheep without a shepherd. It saddens Him to see us wander, with no sense of direction, purpose or hope, but, as you may know, sheep are prone to wander. Another thing about sheep is that they are quite fragile. They are naturally

defenseless. They must be watched continually for they need protection both day and night. Predators continually try to infiltrate the flock to kill the sheep. They are shortsighted. They can only see about 6 feet ahead of them.

No matter how many times you bring wayward sheep back, they are prone to wander off because they can't learn from their mistakes. That's important because sheep are defenseless and dependent. They don't bite, have no claws nor fangs nor even a stink bag like a skunk. No camouflage whatsoever. And they are easily confused and frightened. It doesn't take much to scramble the simple mental yolk of a nervous sheep, which makes them very easy to scatter."

That is why God sent Jesus to be our Shepherd. In John 10:14, Jesus says "I know my sheep and they know me." This is the good news for the day: the creator-God not only looks upon His children with compassion, but has moved into the world to redeem those who are lost, to become the Shepherd of the sheep. Even more than being our shepherd, Jesus became the Lamb, slain for the sins of the world.

A man was guarding 2,000 sheep on a ranch in Texas. He had built a fire and all the sheepdogs were resting around it with him. Suddenly, he heard the unmistakable wail of a coyote with an answering call from the other side of the range. The dogs weren't patrolling and the coyotes seemed to know that.

He threw some more logs on the fire. When he looked out over the fields he saw thousands of little lights focused on him. He writes, "I realized these were the reflections of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. In the midst of danger, the sheep were not looking out into the darkness, but were keeping their eyes set toward the shepherd."

Author Neil Anderson tells about watching a shepherd lead his flock on a hillside outside Bethlehem during a visit to the Holy Land. The shepherd sat on a rock while the sheep grazed. After a time, he stood up, quietly said a few words to the sheep and walked away. The sheep followed him. It was fascinating to Anderson. He said the words of John 10:27 suddenly took a new meaning: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."

Often, in our modern world, the noise of life muffles the Shepherd's voice from us, but the Shepherd still calls. He never stops calling, even when we fail to respond. He knows each of us by name. He cares for us as if there was no one else on the earth for whom He should care.

Jesus' parable in Luke 15 is about a shepherd who had 100 sheep and loses one of them. Do you remember what he did? He went looking for the one, leaving the 99 in

the open country. When he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and heads back home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." Jesus goes on to say "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent."

What we want to understand is that Christ's love is at the same time universal and highly individualized. The Good Shepherd loves all the sheep; at the same time, He loves each individual sheep, as if it were the only sheep in the world to love.

The point is that people often wander from the flock. But there is one who is our Good Shepherd – always seeking to rescue us and bring us back into the fold, if we will allow him to.

One author was so moved by that thought that he put it into a hymn:

"Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God, I love;
Here's my heart, oh take and seal it
Seal it for thy courts above. "

Are you feeling a little lost today? Maybe you feel more than a little lost. You have come to the right place. The Good Shepherd is calling you this day, seeking to help you find your way. When He finds you He will lean down, pick you up and put you on his shoulders and bring you safely back to the flock. Listen closely and you will hear him call your name.

Count me in: Because you are a lost sheep, who is found, how will you share Jesus' invitation to be found with others?