

THE MAN WHO CHANGED THE WORLD - PART 4

“I Am The Good Shepherd”

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John 10:1-5, 11-14

Today, we reach the half-way point in this series of sermons for Epiphany, the Season of Light, that period of the Christian year which commemorates the self-revelation of our Lord. Already we have seen three different aspects of the life and ministry of The Man Who Changed The World as we have reflected upon the strange and, sometimes, startling metaphors He used to describe Himself and His purpose in coming to earth.

This fourth figure, “I Am The Good Shepherd,” has a special poignancy for our church because it is constantly before us in the form of this beautiful painting which dominates our sanctuary and the scripture quotation on the mural to my right. I hope sometime you will take a few minutes out of your busy life to slip into the quiet of our church and let that painting speak to your heart. I promise you will go away with a new lift in your voice and a new song in your soul.

I tried it myself yesterday and know whereof I speak. It isn't easy being the pastor of 800 people. Each an individual with a personality all their own. With background, education, sense of values and inherited traits which often differ from the rest.

Any minister worthy of the name can expect to spend many sleepless nights in prayer over the members of his flock who have special needs, because the only thing which really matters to the minister is what happens to the people. Programs are unimportant. Promotions and planning are merely tools with which he does his work. But people are his raw material, and what happens to them is of utmost importance. If through sickness or sorrow, trial or tribulation they are made to walk through the refiners fire, as far as it is possible their pastor will walk with them

Yesterday, after a week of unusual pastoral demands, I slipped into the sanctuary, took a seat

about a quarter of the way back and looked up at the painting. I've looked at it numerous times, but yesterday I saw it for the first time. I was particularly drawn to the mother ewe the artist has pictured to the right of Jesus. Looking up at the Master, her eyes are filled with apprehension and concern over what is happening to her lamb. Suddenly I heard myself saying, “Lord, that's me. I, too, am concerned for my lambs. Teach me the lesson you are teaching that little mother. Help me rest in the reality that you are The Good Shepherd and will never fail to protect and provide for the sheep of your fold.”

I think I grew ten years during the ten minutes I spent in our sanctuary yesterday. But one thing is certain; I went back to my work refreshed and calm with the assurance that there is nothing the wolves of testing or doubt or spiritual immaturity can do to harm you, my lambs, for Jesus, The Good Shepherd, is standing by.

In your hours of peculiar need, when life has tumbled in, when the stars have dimmed and it is touch and go, remember these words of Jesus. And, if you're near, stop by for a moment alone with God before this painting. I promise you will find a serenity of soul which will send you on your way at peace with God and with yourself.

Twin Truths

This fourth “I Am” of Jesus, is much like the many twin suns which the astronomers tell us fill our heavens. We are told they are actually separate stars, but they revolve around each other in such a fashion as to give the appearance of being one.

Our text is like that. It is composed of two distinct truths. Each casts light on the other. Both increase the common light and are so entwined as to seem, to the casual observer, to be one. But given a more careful scrutiny, it becomes evident that when our Lord used this figure of speech, He was describing not one, but two of facets of His mission among people.

The first is to --

Give Them An Unlimited Quantity Of Life.

In other words, eternal life. And this glorious quantity of life is to be theirs through one great act of purchase by which they become the property of The Good Shepherd.

Every shepherd must purchase his sheep when he begins to gather a flock. That's exactly what Jesus did on Calvary. On many occasions, He declared this to be His purpose. “I am come to seek and to save the lost.”, he said. “I am The Good Shepherd and The Good Shepherd giveth His life for His sheep.” And again, “I lay down my life for the sheep.”

He not only battled the wild animals which threatened His flock, this Good Shepherd actually laid down His life on their behalf. And through His sacrifice, they were given life.

This was something new in the realm of religion. Up 'till then, animals had always been slain for the sake of people. The Old Testament abounds with accounts of how thousands of sheep were offered up in sacrifice for their shepherds. But Jesus reversed the process. Here is a Shepherd who offers Himself as a sacrifice for His sheep. What incredible love!

Now this is not just a pretty parable of the pastoral life of Palestine. “It is,” as someone has said, “the dramatic portrayal of what life is and what Jesus can do about it.” Again and again, the Bible likens people to lost sheep. And there is something deeply personal about that description for “All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way” (Isa.53:6). And the result has been utter chaos.

Like sheep, we have no sense of direction. We take the wrong turn again and again. We simply refuse to look where we're going or to calculate what our actions will do to others. Like sheep, we give most of our waking moments to the satisfaction of our physical needs as if we had never been told that “man does not live by bread alone”. We flit hither and yon, from one passing fancy to the next, thinking only about the present. And when we find that our foibles and failings have made us problems to ourselves, and that we have created circumstances from which we cannot

escape, we turn on God and cry out, “What kind of God would let a thing like this happen?”

As someone has observed, “We cut down forests so water runs unchecked and then wonder why God sends floods. We refuse to lift our hands for slum clearance and then wonder why God sends epidemics. We back off from the idea of making a monetary sacrifice by entering public service...as Christian teachers, for example, and then wonder why God allows juvenile delinquency.” How very much like sheep we are. And how very much like sheep we need a shepherd.

The Good News of the gospel is we have one. That if we look through the night of sin which has enveloped us, we will see a Shepherd standing by in love and patience. Love so amazing, He is willing to shed His blood on our behalf. Patience so eternal, He will not stop His seeking until He has found us and returned us to the safety of His fold.

Giuseppe Garibaldi was an Italian patriot who lived back around the middle of the 19th century. He had a distinguished career as soldier and statesman. But one of his finest hours, and greatest victories, involves an incident which demonstrated the true nature of his greatness. It is not recorded in any of the history books you are likely to read in school.

It happened one night in the year 1861. He was returning from a long day of battle in an effort to unity Italy. As his weary troops marched silently along, he came across a Sardinian shepherd who was lamenting the loss of one of his lambs. To the amazement of all, Garibaldi ordered his small army to stop and make camp. Then, organizing his officers into a search party, he set out in search of the lamb. Even though his warriors scoured the area with lanterns far into the night, the lamb could not be found.

The next morning, Garibaldi's attendant found him in bed fast asleep. This was most unusual, for the general was always up before anyone else. The attendant went off softly and returned a half-hour later to find Garibaldi still asleep. After another delay, the attendant awoke him. The

general sat up, rubbed his eyes, and with a smile reached under the covers, tenderly pulled out a tiny lamb, and asked that it be returned to the shepherd. This great man, who had risked his life again and again in brilliant battle for the liberation of whole nations, had kept up the search alone throughout the night until at last, in the early hours of the morning, he found the lamb which was lost.

This is a poor, inadequate picture but, in some small degree, it may help you to understand the patient persistence of our Lord. Seeking. Striving. Calling. Searching.

“For none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed
Or how dark was the night the Lord passed through
'Ere He found the sheep that was lost.”

“I am the Good Shepherd”, said Jesus, and “the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” Through one great act of incredible and condescending love, He went to a cross and died. Our inheritance, if we are willing to receive it, is a glorious, unlimited quantity of life.

The second facet of His mission Jesus revealed when He referred to Himself as “the Good Shepherd” was --

To Give People A New And Glorious Quality Of Life.

The quantity of life becomes ours through one great act of purchase. The quality of life is ours through continuous acts of protection. In the first instance, Jesus is our Savior. In the second, He is our Sustainer. For our Good Shepherd knows us and calls us by name. He not only saves, but keeps. Two words express what this second phase of our text reveals about The Man Who Changed The World. One is Guide and the other is Guard.

Guide

I spoke briefly about the first word last Sunday and we saw that as “The Light of the World,” Christ offers us guidance. I’d like to add one further thought this morning.

It is apparent to all of us, I’m sure, that neither the good things or the bad things of life are evenly distributed. Whether it be health or wealth, privilege or privation, there is a great inequity about the fortunes of this life.

Actually, this inequality is one of the most penetrating arguments for immortality. Because there is no justice in this life, because so many good people suffer, and so many bad people prosper, this life cannot be the end or justice is a mockery. There must be a future life in which God can make right and equal those things which are not now either right or equal.

But for the present, the only leveling force, the only sustaining influence which can help us maintain our equilibrium amid the wild winds of circumstance which blows so violently about us, is the knowledge that we have as our guide a Good Shepherd who will not lead us where He has not been. And, where He, Himself, will not go!

Oh, there may be, in fact, there will be a Gethsemene somewhere along the line of His leading. Disappointments may come and, in fact, they will come to some of our cherished ideas and plans. It will take faith to change the “D” of Disappointment into the “H” of His-appointment. And yet, when He leads it will be in a path and to an experience which represent our best. Though it may not seem so for a season, time will show we shall be the better for having followed Him—all the way.

Annie Johnson Flint suffered with arthritis for 40 years. But that terrible affliction did not embitter her. And out of the crucible of her suffering came a new and beautiful understanding of the meaning of guidance expressed in these lovely words,

“He giveth more grace when the burden grows greater,

He giveth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials His multiplied peace.

“When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When faith seems to fail, 'ere the day is half-done;
When we come to the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

“His love has no limits, His grace has no Measure,
His power no boundary known unto men:
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!”

The Good Shepherd knows us, His sheep, and He will guide us. But, what is more, He will guard us.

Guard

I had several calls which took me down to the Loop this past week and on Tuesday afternoon, as I waited on the corner of State and Madison, I became aware of the intensity with which the crowd of adults standing with me were watching the traffic light. They were perched on the curb like a flock of geese ready to take flight. One could only conclude by the strain on their faces that the world would come to an end if they did not get across the street the moment the light turned from red to green.

On the opposite side of the street, there was a little boy about four years old. He was dressed in a navy blue snowsuit with a colorful scarf tied over his ears. What looked like the cuff of a pair of red corduroy trousers peeked out of the bottom of his snow pants, and he was having a gay old time dancing about completely oblivious of such mundane things as time and traffic lights.

Only the Good Lord knows what was going on in his little head. But one thing I'm sure of, he wasn't the slightest bit anxious about crossing the street. Why should he be anxious! His tiny hand was held in the firm hand of his mother.

As we passed each other about half way across the street, I gave him a wink and he blinked back. I thought to myself, “What a lesson for grownups.” We go through life filled with fear and foreboding, anxiously worrying about what might happen at the next crossing. When all the time, right here beside us, walks our guardian. And, if we will but slip our hand into His, He will guard us from harm.

That doesn't mean that because you are a Christian trials and tribulations will never come. I have already told you they *will* come. God does not throw a protective, invisible shield around His children which keeps them from all evil. You are in the world and must share the same experiences which come to your fellows.

What this does mean is that you have One who will enter into the tribulations with you. Adding His strength to your weakness. His wisdom to your folly. His sight to your blindness. And thus, there is nothing which can happen to you but that you, and your Shepherd, can handle it together. Indeed, the Good Shepherd knows His sheep and guards them.

The Critical Question

Do you know the Shepherd? There are many strange voices out there crying, “This way. That way. This way.” Some of the voices are evil, for all the so-called shepherds who offer their services are not good. But if you know the One who gave Himself as a sacrifice for His sheep...if you are part of His flock...you will know His voice and you will follow Him.

Somewhere I read of a gathering of people. Among them were a famous actor and a faithful old country preacher who had just retired. The actor was asked to read a passage of scripture and

flawlessly, with great dramatic flair, read the 23rd Psalm. When he finished, there was an avalanche of applause, for the people had been greatly impressed by his performance.

When he sat down, someone asked the old country preacher if he had a favorite Psalm to read. He replied, “Our friend has just read it.” “We’d like you to read it too”, the folks said. He demurred, but the crowd insisted so he stood and, out of the overflow of memory, began to speak:

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside the still waters.

He restores my soul...”

He continued on through that beautiful Psalm and when he finished, there were many who wept, but the only sound that broke the silence was the rustling of coats and dresses as various ones reached for handkerchiefs to wipe away their tears

The famous actor stepped forward, put his arm around the old preacher and said, “Do you know the difference between his rendition and mine? It was not a Psalm this man was saying; it was an experience he was sharing. I knew the Psalm, but he knew the Shepherd!”

I ask you, my friend, which do you know this morning? The Psalm? Or the Shepherd? Believe me, if you know the Shepherd it will make all the difference in the world. And, in the world to come!