

Don't live as if you are without a shepherd

Psalm 23 – Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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Friends, let us pray together:

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the most generous God from whom all the blessings flow. This morning, as we listen to your Word, help us to have the heart that longs for You. And give us the courage to be shaped by Your Spirit. In the most beautiful name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Friends, when the Scripture wants to tell us something about the relationship between God and God's people—more often than not—the writers need to explain it to us using images or symbols or metaphors in order for us to understand it.

It makes sense. Because God's character; God's love; God's being is so beyond everything that we could imagine. That's why we need images or metaphors to help us understand our relationship with this God.

This is why the scripture often talks about our relationship with God as like the relationship between a father with his children. Or God is like the bridegroom that loves the bride. Or God is like the mother hen that protects her babies. Or like in the parables: God is like a vineyard owner. Or a Sower. And so many other images. Those images or metaphors tell us something about the nature of our relationship with God that we won't know otherwise.

Today, in both of our scripture readings, the image that's been given to us is of a shepherd and his sheep. God is like a shepherd and we are His sheep.

I'm sure that as Christians, we're very familiar with this portrayal of God as a shepherd. We've heard sermons about it; we love reading Psalm 23. It can be said that this image of God as a shepherd and we as sheep is one the most loveliest image in the scripture.

Not only that, in fact, archeologists have found that the portrayal of Jesus as a shepherd is one of the earliest (as well as the most common) Christian image in the history of Christianity. It has existed even before Christian symbols and arts can be made explicit (because of persecution).



((Here's one of the earliest depictions of Jesus as the Good Shepherd that was found in Rome dated back to late 2nd century, which is just a generation/two after Jesus. Very cool, right?))

For that reason, just like other images in the Bible, there must be something important that we would not know about God (and about God's relationship with us) if we don't understand about what it means for God to be a shepherd and us to be God's sheep.

Now, it's obvious that I'm not a shepherd. I don't have and never touched a sheep. Well, I'm not even allowed to have pets in my apartment (except fish 😊). So, this image of shepherding is foreign to me (perhaps to you as well) and hence, I won't pretend as if I know first-hand about it. But in preparing for this sermon, I did some readings about sheep-farm and whatever I'm going to tell you next is based on real experiences of real shepherds with real sheep.

What we could do with this real-life information then, is to listen to this real experience and to find treasure in it. and hopefully, we could understand the profound meaning behind this image of shepherd and sheep.

A good place to start, I think, is to find out why sheep needs a shepherd. Do you know why sheep needs a shepherd? Well, it turns out that there are several important reasons. And some of these reasons are alluded in the Bible too.

First, sheep are hardwired to follow each other. And the paths they follow are usually winding. They do this so that they can see the others ahead and behind them. Many shepherds say that this tendency to follow the flock is an inbuilt instinct in their brains that cannot be changed. There's no good sense of direction in a sheep. This is why, without shepherd, if a sheep somehow wanders off from the flock (remember parable of lost sheep?), the rest will follow. And what often happen is that that if a sheep got lost, they're prone to fall off a cliff, and even worse, the rest will follow.

In fact, it truly happened! In turkey, while shepherding, a shepherd was eating a breakfast, then somehow one sheep wandered off and fell off a cliff, and the other 1100 sheep followed! See the report from BBC: More than 400 sheep died in the 15-metre fall – thankfully, their bodies cushioning the fall of 1,100 others who followed. Still, this must be the most expensive breakfast ever!

You see here that sheep is not the brightest animal around. Nowadays, people argue that they're actually intelligent. I'm sure it's true. But that doesn't mean that they're not dumb. **One can be both at the same time.**

Reading further about sheep farm, there's another reason why sheep needs a shepherd. It is because, unlike most animals, sheep don't have a powerful protection against their predators. Snakes have a poisonous venom, lions have sharp fangs, bear have claws. Sheep, on the other hand, are pretty much defenseless. In fact, their defense mechanism (their first instinct) is to flee, not fight. Yes, some breeds may have horns, but even then, they use it mostly **to fight between themselves**. When facing predators, they flee. The shepherd, therefore, needs to protect the sheep.

Here's another reason why sheep needs a shepherd: their wool overgrows. It becomes matted, heavy, dirty, and is infected with parasites.



This sheep's name is Chris. He apparently got lost for 6 years. During those years, he got no shepherd to take care of him. Of course, this picture looks so funny, but this is a very dangerous situation for the sheep. This sheep could barely walk or see. Chris was actually starving. **He looks fat, but he's actually malnourished.** (Not everyone that looks fat and happy is actually truly wholesome). Anyway, imagine if he fell down, he won't be able to get back up by himself, and could easily die of starvation.

So, you see here that sheep needs a shepherd to feed them, to lead them, to protect them, and to keep them healthy and fit. Sheep can't live without their shepherd.

Now, what can we learn from this?

The thing is when the scripture wants us to see God as our Good shepherd, that means we need to see ourselves as the sheep. But it's hard, isn't it? Because to say that we're like sheep is to acknowledge that our lives and existence depend entirely on someone other than ourselves. It is to say that we are actually weak.

And in today's world, it's so hard to think we are that helpless. It's hard because since we're young, we've been educated and conditioned not to depend on anyone. We've got to be independent; we say to ourselves. We've got to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps! Our modern-autonomous-individualistic culture also tells us that "we are the captain of our fate"; that we are our own masters. In life, we even adore the so-called "self-made" people, who think that they owe their success to nobody.

Not only that, we've been also trained to see that being the "upper hand" is better than the "lower hand". We've been programmed to believe that to give is better than to receive (well, even the Bible says that). (we're like David, who wants to build God's house; without realizing that it is actually God that build a house for David).

You see, in this kind of world that we're living in; in this kind of world that encouraged and cultured us to depend on no one; to receive grace from no one; to seek help from no one; in this kind of world that tells us to be the master of our life, it's incredibly hard—even offensive to some— to acknowledge that we are in a desperate need of a shepherd.

I mean, no wonder that many of us would prefer to live as if we're sheep without a shepherd.....This is why we often choose to live as if we are without a shepherd.

But remember, without a shepherd, we will wander away; we'll go astray; we'll be lost.

And isn't that what many of us are all feeling right now? Deep down, we feel lost somehow. Despite of all our successes and all of our beautiful experiences; despite of all our wonderful feelings and aliveness, somehow deep down, we know that "this is still not it." There seems to be this perpetual longing for something. For a good life. For fullness. But we have no idea what that "good life" truly is.... We have no idea what fullness is....

Like King Solomon, we say, "everything under the sun is meaningless." But the hardest part is: we don't even know what is it that we truly want. What we know is that this longing cannot be satisfied by all of our present accomplishments and experiences. It's often called as **languishing**... it's a universal restlessness.... It's the feeling of being lost even on the right path....

Maybe, just maybe, maybe we're all lost like a sheep without a shepherd afterall.

And like a sheep without the protection of a shepherd, we keep running away from those predators that want to destroy us. We are constantly on the run. Away from the feeling of being lost. "We don't need a shepherd," we said to ourselves repeatedly while running away!

So, we've tried many things that we thought could keep us safe while we're on the run: good careers, hobbies, money, drugs, even love.... Sadly, we're running away, not just from the predators, **but also from the shepherd**....

Yes, sometimes, we experience this feeling of being whole/full and safe, but just minutes after that, we are once again searching for something.... We're on the run again.... Like Elijah the prophet who just won a great victory over prophets of Baal, but only minutes after that, felt tired and he wanted to die.

But it doesn't matter. We keep doing it anyway... we keep running.... again and again and again. Because at least, it distracts us from this feeling of being lost.... In fact, we've become addicted to it: to money and wealth; to people's recognition; to success; to be on the top; to power; to safety, to be loved. We desire all sort of things, ***except our shepherd***.

No wonder we've become so numbed. We can no longer "feel." We can no longer find meaning in our lives... Worse! we don't even feel the need to find meaning in our lives.... We're just "doing" it.... We exist.... We just think that we need to be productive, to be always on the run. We've become like Chris, the big-heavy sheep that full of wool, but deep down, he's starving. Like Chris, we can't barely see or walk.... We have enough, yet it's still not enough.... We have plenty but it never satisfies... And along the way, we've perhaps collected so much **debris of pains and parasites of hates and disappointments and uncertainties** too.

It's tiring living like that. It's exhausting to live without a shepherd.....

But here's the good news: In Mark chapter 6 passage that we've read, there's a story when Jesus was hoping to sit by himself and to rest in a secluded place, but then many people followed him. And v.34 says this, "As he went ashore, he saw this great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like **sheep without a shepherd**"

Praise be to God!

When Jesus Christ saw the crowd;

When Jesus Christ saw the people, who are always on the run;

When Jesus Christ saw the people, who are lonely and tired and find everything under the sun to be meaningless;
When Jesus Christ saw the people of Canada that have everything they need yet never truly satisfied;
When Jesus Christ **saw us**;
When Jesus Christ saw you and me;

He had compassion because we were confused and helpless, ***like sheep without a shepherd.***

And because of his compassion, our Good Shepherd chose to leave the 99 behind. The 99 heavenlies; the 99 thrones of heaven; the 99 angels; the 99 glories and honors. Because of compassion, he chose to lay down his life for the sake of one sheep that got lost..... **for the sake of us.**

Praise be to God, because of his compassion, he chose to lay down his life for us—his sheep— so that we could one day taste the fullness, the good life, the wholeness, the redemption that we've been longing for.

So today, listen carefully.... Listen closely.... with your heart. Can you hear it? Can you hear that the shepherd is calling you by name today?

This morning, if we do, may we be courageous enough; oh may we be starving enough! to be embraced, to be loved, and to be graced by our shepherd, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

May it be so. Amen.