

The Shepherd calls us...
Psalm 23; John 10: 22-30
April 25, 2010

How many **of you can remember being a small child** and getting lost from your parent? What did you do? If you were like me you started to call out for your mom or dad. In my case, I called out for my mother. I was lost and frightened. And somehow over the blaring store music, the voices of other children and adults in the store, and the roaring air conditioner, my mother **heard me. She recognized my voice and she began** calling back. We recognized each other's voices and the calling out helped us to draw nearer to one another and ultimately to be reunited.

Jesus says to us in the gospel of John, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me;" (Jn. 10: 27) Now, if you ask **people what animal they would like to be, you** probably are never going to hear anyone say a sheep. Most would reply a lion, a dolphin, a bear... Usually our response is an animal that is beautiful yet strong. I have not met anyone who **has said that they would like to be a sheep.** We are content to call Jesus the Shepherd, but not so content about being called a sheep. I think mostly because we think of them as cute yet vulnerable animals that fall prey to wolves and other predators. No one wants to be vulnerable or devoured. Admittedly, my only **experience with sheep has been at petting zoos. They** seem like gentle and loving creatures, and from what I have read sheep have excellent hearing, which actually can work against them because they can be easily frightened. They also have good **vision but poor depth perception. Sheep, reportedly, will** easily follow the voice of the one who has consistently fed them. Yet they can easily get lost. Sheep prefer to be led and not herded from behind. Lastly I read that, **"... sheep tend to want to herd from the areas that are dark into lighter areas."**¹

¹ <http://www.howtodothings.com/pets-animals/herd-sheep>

So when we compare ourselves to sheep as our Psalter and gospel readings would have us to, we are perhaps more like them than we have been willing to admit. We hear the voice or calling of God upon our lives and yet at times we still get lost in our own sinfulness and our desire to do our will instead of **God's will. We trust our instincts more than we trust** the shepherd's leading. We, at times, bolt in the opposite direction of God's leading. "This is how we get into real trouble – by running when we are [frightened and] lost. It is then that we make **[some of] the worst mistakes with relationships, family, and work.** The same could be said of churches, schools and governments. Not convinced that the Lord is leading us to green pastures, we veer off course, try a short cut or run like terrified sheep."² We find ourselves in dark valleys and we wonder, "**How did I get here?**" **The good news for us is that we are never alone.** Our texts make clear, the shepherd is always with us to lead us and guide us back to the place of comfort and promise.

Are all of our dark valley moments self inflicted, no. For some of us that dark valley moment is a diagnosis of a major illness, a notice stating that we have been fired from our job **like some of our area teachers, the death of a loved one, our partner telling** us they want a divorce. We are lost and in the valley when we find ourselves in a relationship that hurts us more than gifts us with love, when we find ourselves in a job that leaves us depleted and spent, in the guilt of not being good enough, pretty enough or smart enough for someone whose judgment cuts deep.³ **Undoubtedly those who are of Mexican American decent living in** Arizona today are experiencing dark valley moments simply because of the ethnicity they have been born into. So how do we find our way out of the dark valleys in life and return to the fold?
How do we return to that place of feeling safe and being fed?

² Craig Barnes. "Sheep on the Run (Psalm 23)" found in The Christian Century, Feb. 13-20, 2002, p. 17; referenced on www.religion-online.org;

³ ibid

In biblical times sheep herds were placed in a sheepfold or pen every night to keep them safe from predators. In the morning each shepherd would return to the pen and call their sheep by name or otherwise identify them and separate them out into the appropriate herd. This required the shepherd to **be able to identify which sheep belonged** to his fold, but it also required the sheep to be able to identify their shepherd's voice. It was in leading the sheep out of the sheepfold that the shepherd was leading them into the dangers and realities of the world **outside of the safety of the pen, but they were also being led** to green pastures in which to be fed and nourished. There was intentionality upon the leading shepherd and the listening sheep. We also must be intentional - Intentional about cultivating our relationship with God through our spiritual practices of prayer, **reading our daily devotionals, studying scripture and even our** relationships with one another because collectively we are the body of Christ. We embody Christ here on earth.

As the body of Christ, we are called to discern the voice of our loving shepherd from all **of the other clamoring voices we hear in the world. It** is the voice of Jesus which calls us out of the sheepfold and into the world. What does the sheepfold look like to us today? Does our church, Peace UCC, represent the sheepfold? It is here that we take comfort in discussing our responsibility for meeting the **needs of the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, and** **marginalized.** We talk about how we are called to be God's change agents helping to lead those who are considered the least among us to greener pastures and to places which renew life. Places filled with goodness and affirming steadfast love. "What about taking seriously the call, in the lesson from 1st John, to translate our beliefs into action? What if we were to take the gospel we **proclaim on Sundays and translate it into action the rest of the week?** Isn't that part of our

vocation as Christians? To carry the gospel **of Jesus Christ with us when we leave the safety of the sheepfold?**⁴

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” offers this about the twenty-third Psalm; This Psalm provides the answer to the question, “How do you live in a dangerous, unpredictable, frightening world?” It does this by reminding us that it is God **who is on our side and not on the side of the terrible things that happen** to us. Rabbi Kushner goes on to say that some “people who have been hurt by life get stuck in ‘the valley of the shadow,’” and they don’t know how to find their way out. And that’s the role of God. The role of God is not to explain and not to justify but to comfort, to find people when they are living in darkness, take them by the **hand, and show them how to find their way into the sunlight** again.”⁵ Remember, we are the body of Christ here on earth. As the body, we are the ones who have been called to lead one another out of the darkness through the living out of our faith. We **are called to comfort one another in sharing our faith.** We are called to share the good news that nothing can separate us from the presence of God in our lives or the love of God for us. No amount of sinfulness or our past choices can separate us. God says you are my sheep and I am **here for you in the lives and love you share with one another.**

My sisters and brothers we must nurture our relationship with our shepherd so that we may identify his voice from all of the other voices calling out to us. He is the good shepherd who does not promise us this life will be easy, but does promise to always be present in our lives leading us to something more beautiful, rich and full if we follow his voice. As the body of **Christ we are given the task of helping others who do not know his voice** to know him and to follow as well. We are called to share in and live out the message that “The Lord is my

⁴ Rev. Sylvia Czarnetzky. “Spiritual Formation” May 3, 2009
<http://www.chapelofthecrossms.org/spiritual/sermons/5-3-2009.html>

⁵ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week813/feature.html>

shepherd, I lack nothing... **he restores my soul...even though I walk through** the valley of deepest darkness...thou art with me... surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of **my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**” (Psalm 23) Amen.