

“The Good Shepherd”

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John 10: 10-18 & Psalm 23

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Jesus gives a number of “I Am” statements in the gospels: I am the vine, I am the gate, I am the bread of life, I am the way, the truth and the life... One of the best known and greatest images of Jesus is “I am the good shepherd”.

Part of the reason it’s such a strong image is because of the 23rd Psalm, *The Lord is my Shepherd*, which is probably the best-known passage of scripture. Even though it is in the Old Testament and written thousands of years before Jesus was born, as Christians we put those images together and very much bring Jesus into that Psalm.

Giving Jesus the image of the shepherd naturally makes us the sheep. There are all kinds of references to the people of God being like sheep. Psalm 100:3 reads: “*Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*”

Psalm 23 is attributed to King David, and you may remember that King David himself was a shepherd. While all his older brothers were in the army, David the youngest was in the hills tending sheep. He understood exactly the role of a shepherd, and so it is interesting that he writes it from the vantage point of being a sheep that needed a shepherd to guide and protect him.



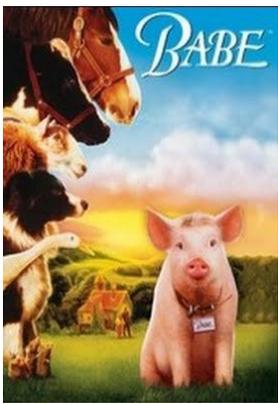
Now my first-hand experience and knowledge of sheep is limited, so I did a little research.

The Agriculture Society in Canada put out a fact sheet for people getting into the business of tending sheep:

Understanding Sheep Behaviour. Here are some things I learned.

- Sheep are social animals, so try and prevent seclusion.
- Sheep by nature are followers; let them follow and don’t drive them as you would cattle.
- Sheep are docile animals by nature.

- Sheep have good memories; these memories need to be positive ones as much as possible. (Apparently they can remember up to 50 individual faces for up to 2 years and will remember if that face was a positive experience or negative!)
- Sheep like routine, so be patient when introducing something new.
- Sheep reactions are predictable, so use them.
- Sheep react negatively to loud noises and yelling.
- Sheep move best when not afraid, so work slowly and calmly.
- Sheep will move towards other sheep.
- Sheep have no depth perception, so shadows, dark surfaces and water are an issue.



I can't help but think of the movie *Babe* when I hear this description of the sheep. The sheep dogs are rough and tend to drive and growl and nip at the sheep, but Babe the pig is a lot more like the good shepherd. He is kind and patient and leads them to their pen. Check out this clip: <https://youtu.be/OzHmeTeLgMY>

If Babe is what a good shepherd looks like, what does a bad one look like? Jesus said he was the good shepherd, and he talks about the bad shepherds. In Ezekiel 34 we hear more about the bad shepherds.

Listen to this: *"The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds:*

Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals."

God was speaking to the leaders, the religious leaders and to the kings and rulers—to anyone who was in a leadership role. It is so sad and terrible when leaders use their power to gain more for themselves instead of serving and helping people, especially those who are powerless and vulnerable.

I was just talking to someone this week who is helping to form a tenant association. This person has noticed that the property management

company of their building seems to be blatantly making money off the backs of tenants who have little money or power, while at the same time intimidating tenants and tricking them into leaving so that they can jack the rent for the next tenant. I was pretty impressed that this person was taking on this role. It seemed like a David and Goliath story.

When Jesus goes to the temple and turns over the tables of the money changers, he says that they have made the temple into a '*den of thieves*'. Who lives in dens? Generally it's the predators. And there are so many predators out there, like the men who prey on the most vulnerable of young girls in the sex trafficking trade so that they can make a lot of money.

We need to open our eyes. As followers of Jesus we are called to be good shepherds, to watch out for and build up those who are vulnerable. Who are the vulnerable in your circle? Who are you called to protect and watch out for? Your children? Your parents or elderly friends? Those living on the edge with financial and health concerns? Those of us who have more — more education, more money, more health, more privilege simply by virtue of our skin colour, gender, sexual orientation — we need to be aware of those who have less and need more.

For thus says the Lord God:... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. Ezekiel 34:11, 15-16

The truth is, we all need a good shepherd. We are all vulnerable at times in our life. Think of the last time you felt weak or vulnerable. Wednesday was one of those days for me and for many when we heard the news that our MP Gord Brown had died so suddenly while in his office on Parliament Hill. We know these things happen, but it just shakes us to hear of someone young and so healthy — playing hockey sometimes 5 times a week — gone in an instant. You can't help but feel shaken and vulnerable.

The people of God have a history of vulnerability, having been enslaved in Egypt and then scraping out a living in the harsh desert, always surrounded by dominant and threatening nations. Perhaps that's why the 23rd Psalm is so well loved. It is honest about the fact that the journey of life is not always easy and that we are so very often vulnerable. There are times when it is harsh and frightening.

One of the things about sheep is that they don't really like to move ... *but they have to be moved!* Sheep very quickly graze down an area to

absolutely nothing, and they *must* be moved to other pastures. Moving and change is not an option if they are going to survive. Again that is so much like us. We so wish that things could stay the same. We so wish we could just hang out in that green pasture beside the cool water, but we can't. We need to go on to the next pasture! That often means going through a dangerous valley where you are hemmed in and where there is little room to run from a predator or from a natural disaster like a flash flood. The rod and the staff that bring comfort are both weapons and tools. The rod is to bludgeon a predator, and the staff is often to nudge and guide the sheep, or to rescue them when they fall.

The end of Psalm 23 says: "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*"



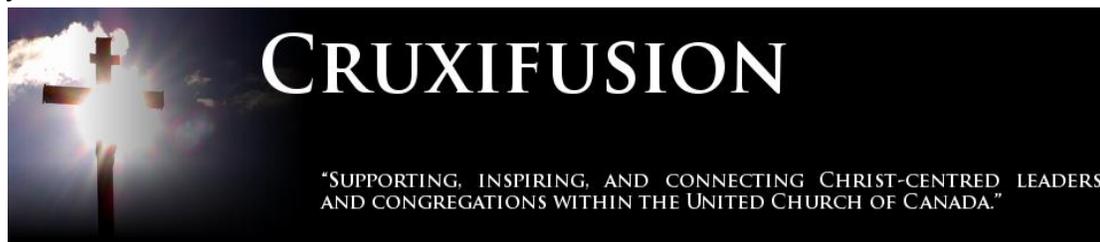
The house of the Lord is not the mansion in the sky, but a sense of belonging to a house—to a tribe, here and now.

Remember that Jesus was from 'the house of David'. This means that we are members of God's family and that we belong. You belong. Have you ever been somewhere and thought "I don't belong here"? Maybe you feel that right now. You need to know deep down that you belong to the House of God. There is no greater house, tribe or family. "Goodness and mercy" are the translation of the Hebrew word *Hesed*, which is that strong, covenantal love of God. *Hesed* is an unshakable, unfailing love – there is nowhere you can go and nothing you can do that will break that rock-solid love of God has for you. And it doesn't just follow you. '*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*' is a weak translation of the Hebrew. God's love is a strong and mighty love that will seek you, even pursue you, all your life.

The 23rd Psalm speaks of God's presence. That is the greatest gift we can have: the sense of the presence of God throughout our days. If I, like a genie, could give you one gift, it would not be an easy life. It would not be money, it would not be health or long years, it would not be status or power or great talent — it would be the presence of God. The others would

be nice too, but the thing I value most in my life is the Presence of God. I have been blessed that that presence just keeps increasing in my life. Of course ... there are times when it takes a dip. If I had a graph of my life in respect to how I have felt the presence of God, it would look a bit like the stock market – you would see dips and occasional crashes because of what life has thrown my way. But overall, it is trending up. And some of those crashes end up being followed by great peaks. Why is it going up? A big part has to do with making a commitment to seeking that presence. Carving out time, which usually means setting an alarm clock to be in God's presence; reading scripture, praying in my prayer journal and listening for God's voice ... all help me sense the nearness of God.

Community also makes a huge difference. Last week, in the first part of the week, I was in Toronto at a Conference for Christ-Centered UCC clergy called 'Cruxifusion.'



Events like that make all the difference in the world to me. When you have the presence of God you can survive any challenge, you can walk through any valley, you can go to any dark place and bring that presence with you to save others.

My prayer for you today is that you would know God's presence, that you would know that you are not alone. That the Lord, the good shepherd, is here to guide you, to correct you when you do things that harm instead of help, to pick you up and heal you in your brokenness and pain. My prayer is that you would also take on the role of a good shepherd. That you would bring God's presence to others. That you would see the world through the incredible love and justice of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.