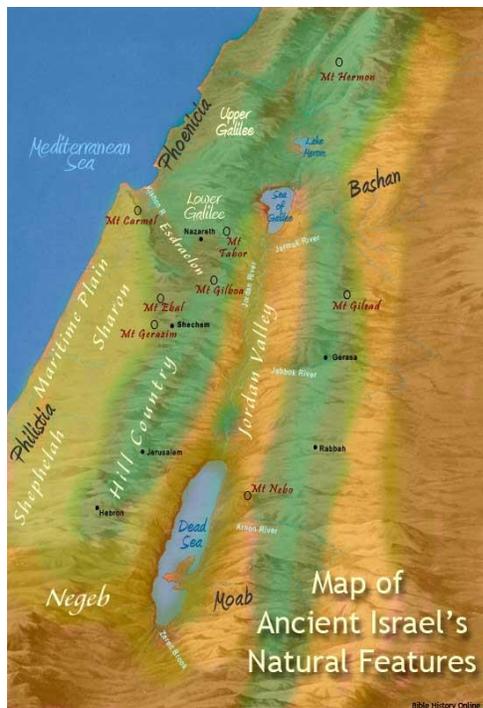


# “A Clear Focus”

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John 10: 1-19

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From the time of King David to Jesus' time and well beyond, shepherds were always a common sight on the Judean uplands. The ground there is rough and stony — not very good for agriculture. That's actually why the Israelites were there. The Philistines, who were far stronger and more powerful, controlled the coastal plains and had much better land. But if the highlands were not terrific for agriculture, they were ideal for sheep.

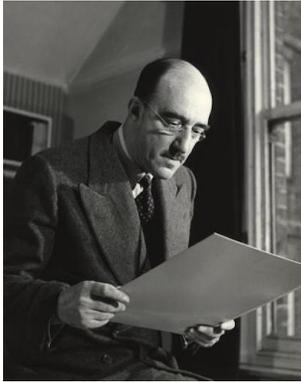


The idea of being a shepherd has been romanticized in song and story, but the reality was very different. The life of a Palestinian shepherd was extremely hard. They were among the poorest people in all the land. They spent months on the hillsides in all kinds of weather ... it was hot and dry in the daytime and freezing cold at night. They always had to compete with other shepherds for what little grass and watering places could be found. Often one strong faction would dominate and drive the others away, so there were constant fights. The sheep had to be always watched. On either side of the plateau the ground falls sharply away, especially on the east side where the land falls down toward the Dead Sea. I have

been there, and I've seen the steep cliffs that plunge down to the desert below. Any sheep that got lost down in the escarpment would be in great danger of being taken by a predator. And when I say a predator — there were still lions roaming around in David's time. But a far greater threat to any shepherd than even a lion, were the Bedouins.

It was all too common for a band of Bedouins to sweep in from the desert and carry off all the sheep they could carry. Any shepherd who resisted was inevitably murdered -- but resist they did. It was not unusual to find a flock scattered and the shepherd dead, his throat cut by a gang of bandits that had struck suddenly and without mercy.

So you see, when Jesus said "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep," he was not just using a colourful metaphor. Many of the people listening to him would have known of friends or family who had been murdered on the hillsides of Judea while tending their sheep. A hired hand would, of course, have no such commitment. At the first sight of Bedouins he would take off and run as fast as his legs could carry him. It was different with a good shepherd. The actual owner of the sheep developed a bond with his animals that was really quite unique. One shepherd would look after maybe a dozen sheep. He would know and have a name for each one. And he would check each one every day.



The other fascinating thing is that, just as Jesus said, the sheep literally knew their master's voice, and would follow no one else. It was H.V. Morton who discovered exactly what this meant. You may never have heard of him, but your grandparents would have. Morton was a well-known British traveler and author in the early nineteen hundreds. One of his classic books was called "In the Footsteps of the Master." In the 1920's Morton went to Palestine, doing his best to retrace Jesus' footsteps. He went to each place recorded in the gospels, and described them as he found them. One of the most interesting descriptions he gives is of three Arab shepherds calling their sheep in the early dawn. The night before, three shepherds with their flocks mingled together had spent the night in a circular enclosure made of loose stones, exactly like the one Jesus described in John's gospel. In close to two thousand years, nothing had changed. The night before, as the sheep had entered the enclosure each one had been quickly checked by his shepherd for any sign of injury. Then, when the shepherds were satisfied that all the sheep were safely in, they themselves lay across the entranceway for the night. Nothing could enter or leave the sheepfold except by going over top of them. They literally became the door for the sheep, exactly as Jesus said. The next morning Morton got up very early (it was barely light) to see what would happen. He was curious to see how they would separate out their sheep. What happened amazed him. Each shepherd went a little distance away from the other two, and simply called his sheep. The call was like nothing Morton had ever heard before. It was a kind of high-pitched singsong like cry. He said it sounded eerie — un-human. But if Morton hadn't heard such a sound before, the sheep certainly had. The cries had no sooner sounded than an answer bleat came from the sheep and they all ran out of the enclosure separating themselves out into their

three separate flocks and followed after their own shepherd. The shepherds of Palestine, in places they do to this day, lead their flocks, and the sheep follow.

I read a more recent article by an American who was living in the Middle East and was fluent in Arabic. This happened in the 1980's. After watching some shepherds call their sheep, he asked if he could try. The shepherds thought this was rather amusing but they told him to go ahead. He did. He tried hard, very hard to imitate the sounds the shepherds made. But the sheep ignored him — didn't move an inch. After he quit trying he asked the shepherds, do sheep ever follow someone other than their own master?" To his surprise, they said "*Yes. Sometimes, if a sheep gets sick, it will follow anyone. The ones that are healthy will only follow their own shepherd.*"

When I read that I thought — wow! It is so similar with people. When our inner spirits – our souls – are healthy we have no trouble knowing who to follow and who not to. We know what's good and what's bad. But when we're spiritually unhealthy, when we have a sick soul, that's when we will follow anyone; take any pill; go down any path. There is an old saying, "*If you don't know where you're going, any path will take you there*" — even a path that leads to great harm.

Contrary to what you might assume from reading the 23rd Psalm, shepherds were not admired by the religious leaders of Jesus' day. The Scribes and Pharisees, especially, had no use for them. Shepherds lived on the fringe of society. They were dirt poor, and poor people are never admired. Out on the hills, the job was long, hard and dirty, and they simply could not afford the luxury of following all the complicated religious laws – dietary and Sabbath – which the Rabbis and Pharisees taught. For one thing, they never bothered to wash before they ate. It just wasn't practical. According to the Rabbis that meant that they were defiled. Even worse — when looking after sheep, the Sabbath was no different than any other day. They regularly walked far beyond what the Sabbath law allowed. On the Sabbath the Law specified that the farthest you could walk was 2,000 cubits, and not one step further. That's about a third of a mile. For a shepherd that was ridiculous. And when occasionally a rabbi would admonish them, they would laugh, make a rude comment about his ancestry and suggest to him where he might stick his ideas. Well, the good Rabbis and Pharisees were absolutely scandalized by such people. As far as they were concerned, any group that regularly and consistently broke any part of the O.T. Law were nothing but a bunch of ignorant, unclean, dirty heathens. They held them in contempt. They had a Hebrew word for

them – Amhaaretz. It meant people of earth — heathens. I find it fascinating that our English word ‘heathen’ has exactly the same derivation. A heathen is someone who works in the soil – the heath. For sure in Jesus’ time, no Rabbi or Pharisee would ever have compared himself to a shepherd. It would have been an insult.

Jesus was so very different. It’s possible to look at people who earn their living by the sweat of their brow, who are covered in dirt, and see only coarseness and roughness. Back in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Cape Breton miners emerged from the coal pits at nightfall, they were covered in grime. For most of the years there were no showers for them. When they arrived home they didn’t look very pretty. They were strong men. You had to be to work in the mines. And yet I have not forgotten listening to the daughter of one of them. I met her in Toronto in the 1960s, but she grew up in Cape Breton. I clearly remember her telling me how most of the miners were not just good people, but also very gentle. It was like that in Jesus’ day. The ordinary people admired the shepherds, and so did Jesus. Their watchfulness, their courage, and their patient love for their flocks spoke to Jesus of the care and love of God, exactly as it had to David when he wrote Psalm 23, a thousand years before. “I am the good shepherd.” Jesus said, “I know my own and my own know me.” And it’s so very true.

The key to my sermon today is this — we all need and indeed we all have a focus in life – but what is our focus, how good is it and how clear is it? It isn’t always that easy to be sure what your focus is. When we are asked about what values and morals we live by, we all have a presentation set. The presentation set is more what we know we should be about than what we really are. Surveys show that around 26% of Canadians say they attend Church regularly – that’s defined as at least once a month. But we know that the actual figure of Church attendance is more like 10%. It’s not that people lie about it, so much as they report what they feel they *should* be doing, rather than what they *are* doing.

So what is your focus in life? To find out, simply ask yourself, what do I spend my time and especially my money on? That’s what will tell you what you really care most about.

When it comes to a focus in life, for huge numbers of people it’s about money. The amount of evil perpetrated all over this world for money is just staggering. For others, the focus is about prestige and image. We all want to look good in the eyes of others. For many it’s about escape from the pain and futility of life – leading to alcohol & drugs addictions.

To everyone, what I wish to say is remember, remember that life is short and it's always uncertain. Do you remember what Jesus said? What will it profit you if you could gain the whole world at the cost of your soul?  
Mark 8: 34-37

This community of faith, called Wall Street United Church – for better and for worse – is the flock that we here are part of. Our good shepherd is Jesus. It is he who called you to come today and be part of it. And I mean that. You're here because you heard his call – however faintly. Something told you that you needed to be here. When you're here, something good always happens. Our souls become nurtured and we grow in grace. Sunday-by-Sunday we learn a little more about our own faith and we grow in our understanding. As we open ourselves to God's Spirit, we find strength and comfort. And, just as in biblical times, we are led to where the grass is green and the water is still. Sheep are unable to drink from turbulent water. We can't either. When the world around us becomes too stressful or violent, we start to shut down. And today we are living in a very stressful age. My wife doesn't like even listening to the news — so often upsets her.

Well, this is the one time in the entire week when you do something completely different. There is a wonderful tranquility in this place. Here you can sense the love and grace of Christ calling you to a better way and bringing peace to your soul.

When I say Jesus calls you, I mean he calls you by your name — Ted, Jean, Mary, Ann, Jason, Heather, Harold, Tom, Gail ..... put in your own name. Know that you are not an accident of fate wandering briefly across this planet for a short of time. You are known and called by name. To you Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd — I lay down my life for my sheep. Come and follow me!" Trust me. You will not regret it. Amen.