

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

A sermon preached the 7th of May 2017, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, at St Stephen's Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on John 10. 1 – 22.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

— John 10. 1 – 10

Once upon a time, when my sons Evan and Gabriel were very young and the sun shone on forever, we lived across the road from a shepherd named Richard and his little flock of sheep. I would take my boys over and tell them I'd give them 50 cents if they could touch a sheep. They would sneak up to them. Evan would whisper, Gabriel would whisper after him, "Here, sheepy sheepy sheepy." The sheep would scatter. The boys would run after them but the sheep shied away. Why? Because sheep don't follow a stranger.

So it is with us. We may struggle to be faithful, but once you know Jesus as your shepherd, his voice is unmistakable. In modern American sheep farming the size of flocks has become in many places too large for this analogy to hold. When you have a mob of a five hundred or more sheep, shepherding becomes impersonal. But Bedouin shepherds today in the middle east, they still have smaller flocks, and the flock knows the shepherd's voice. Even now, as in the ancient world, several shepherds will gather their sheep and bring them into a fenced-in enclosure or into a cave for the night to protect them from predators, and the flocks intermingle. In the morning the shepherds go out of the cave or pen and one shepherd will go over here, another over there, and a third one will go on the other side and they just start calling. And the sheep sort themselves out flawlessly, going after the one who is their rightful shepherd. "The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out . . . and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."

It's not just his voice. It's that he knows *your* voice. In the ancient world, and even today, experiments have

been done where they blindfold the shepherd, and the shepherd will recognize the bleat of individual sheep in his fold. "My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them."

There may come a time in my life, there may come a time in your life, when dementia or senility will overtake us, or perhaps a dreadful stroke will strike, and we will forget the people we love the most, that have meant the most in our lives. The poet and prophet Isaiah, twenty eight centuries ago, wrote, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the baby she bore? Your mother may forget the baby she bore and nursed, may forget you someday. But though that might happen, I will not forget you," the Lord says in Isaiah [49]. "Behold, I have engraved your names on the palms of my hand." The nail-pierced hands of our savior have your name, your mother's name, written upon them. He will never forget us. He knows us when we no longer know ourselves or our children.

Do you remember when Jesus saw Nathanael approaching (if you don't, nod as if you do), and said of him, "Behold, a true Israelite in whom there is no guile." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. And Jesus answered, "I saw you whilst you were still under the fig tree, before Philip called you." Shouldn't Nathanael have said, "Wow, you have excellent vision, Jesus"? Or, "Which fig tree?"

No, no. In rabbinic literature being 'under the fig tree' is a figure of speech meaning you were in your prayer closet. 'Under the fig tree' is where you go to say your private prayers, where no one but God hears you. Jesus

said, “I saw you while you were under the fig tree.” And Nathaniel declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says. I know my sheep, and my sheep know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. I lay down my life for the sheep.”

It's helpful to know the historical context to today's lesson. We have to read beyond verse ten to the twenty-second verse to appreciate it. “At that time the Feast of Dedication took place in Jerusalem.” What's the Feast of Dedication? It's the Greek way of saying what in Hebrew is called *hanukkah*. When you take this in you begin to understand this business about false shepherds, the thieves who rob, kill, and destroy.

Hanukkah is a celebration of an event that took place between the Old and New Testaments, in the intertestamental period, at around 146 BC. *Hanukkah* in Hebrew means dedication; in usage, it refers to the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after it had been defiled by the Greek oppressor Antiochus Epiphanes.

Antiochus was a Seleucid emperor, his empire descended from the empire of Alexander the Great. He was hell-bent on a program of rapid Hellenization. He imposed on the Jews the Greek language and customs. He outlawed the sabbath and replaced it with a monthly celebration of his own birthday. He outlawed circumcision and all the Jewish rites. He insisted that Jews would no longer observe the clean/unclean distinction. He required Jews to eat swine flesh because the pig was sacred to the Greeks.

How did Antiochus Epiphanes pull off his eleven-year reign of terror that included the slaughter of many faithful Israelites who refused to go along? The desecration of the holy of holies, the plundering of the Temple of its sacred vessels of gold and silver — how did that come about? It was facilitated in large part by the complicity of Israel's compromising, spineless priests, through their going along to get along. Her shepherds paid bribes to Antiochus to get appointed to priestly

offices, so they could cheer him on at the sidelines, their more ‘enlightened theology’ making the faith ‘relevant’ to the times, politically correct.

Because of that, in Jesus' day, on Hanukkah they didn't light eight candles just to indicate how everyone was glad that the sacred space was rededicated and the lampstands functioned again within the Temple. They lit the candles to recognize that not only did the Temple need to be cleaned, but the priesthood, the religious leadership, needed to be cleaned. So by the time Jesus said these words, on Hanukkah, it was the tradition to read Ezekiel 34.

I read it now to myself and my fellow priests in the room; the rest of you can overhear it. Ezekiel writes, “The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy, say to them, this is what the sovereign Lord says, Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves. Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds. You clothe yourselves with the wool. You slaughter the choice animals; but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak, or healed the sick, or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays and searched for the lost. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.”

God promises through Ezekiel to judge the unfaithful priests. “This is what the sovereign Lord says. ‘I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he's with them, so I will look after my sheep and will rescue them.’” No wonder Jesus declares himself to be the good shepherd. “I and the Father are one,” Jesus says. It all comes together in the ministry of Christ.

“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA, Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501, or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org or at www.facebook.com/St.Stephens.Belvedere