

"15 minute sermon"

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Salem United Methodist Church

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Scripture Reading: Psalm 100; Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

Sermon title: "Are we lost or found sheep?"

Before I get into the main part of the message today, we are going to explore the nature of sheep. I have some images, courtesy of Google and some photographs taken by Joanna to share.

Sheep are mentioned over 500 times in the Bible, which makes them the most discussed animal. There are many reasons for this so we are going to look at sheep and their behavior. It is their behavior we need to look at and I want to relate a personal encounter that happened recently.

As many of you are aware, Joanna and I went to England in late September and early October to see her family, primarily her mother, Helen, who lives in a nursing home and stay with her sister, Liz, and brother-in-law, Dave Ayres, who at the time was in the hospital himself, not sure of when he was coming home. Home is Hanslope, Buckinghamshire, about 50 miles north of London. With all of that going on, Joanna and I took some side trips to give Liz a break from having to entertain us. On September 29th we drove southwest to the county of Wiltshire to see if I could find evidence of my English roots. We stayed the night at a bed and breakfast in the town of Devizes, then got up and drove back to Hanslope the next morning. [Next slide please]

Here is a map of our journey back to Hanslope. To give you some perspective, greater London is in the lower right hand corner of the map with Devizes in the lower left hand corner of the map, circled and with the yellow arrow. We wanted to see some of the country, some towns we never saw before, so we drove primarily on local roads, avoiding much of the super highways available to us. I particularly wanted to avoid Oxford, with its complex intersections and traffic jams. We were on our way to the upper part of the map, about 90 miles from Devizes, to that small circle with the yellow arrow. In that little circle is Hanslope. That meant windy, narrow

roads and some towns with speed limits of 15 miles per hour. I had to contend with slow drivers, construction of multi-lane round-a-bouts and despite a GPS the occasional missed turn. We were about to take that small circle, when we came to the town of Castlethorpe, about 3 miles from Joanna's sister's home. I was tired and did I tell you I was driving the car with a stick shift in my left hand? [next slide please]. We came to this intersection. The road running from left to right is Hanslope road. Joanna's sister is just 3 miles away - once I make the left turn. As we called ahead, we know a good hot cup of tea awaits us in less than 5 minutes.

Take a good look at this serene picture from Google Street View. There is a farm, Orchard Farm by name, a neat, well-kept farm. You can see sheep on the right resting and grazing in their fenced in meadow. They are safe. They have water. They have good rich food in the lush, moist grass. The farmer only wants these sheep for their wool, wool he will harvest next spring to make them cool for the summer months. I have probably been to this intersection more than a dozen times over the last 20 years and it is a view I have always appreciated. It has not changed.

So, we come to this intersection. Joanna was tired at this point of the drive. She was dozing with the sun on the side of her head. But I wake her up frantically. I am practically shouting. Joanna, get your camera! Get your camera! Joanna has her point and shoot camera ready in just a few seconds. [next slide please].

So what do we have? We have lost sheep pouring out of their meadow! Someone on the farm left a gate unlatched. They are so lost [next slide please] that they do not know where they are going. They turn around and head in another direction, but it is not the direction they originally came from. What else do you see? It is all of the sheep. Not one was left in their safe surroundings. Their lives are in danger on this busy road. There is a semi-blind bend on the left. All it takes is one not too cautious driver to make a few of them road kill. They stay in a group, heading in the same general direction, but appear to be clueless about where they are going, let alone why they are trying to get there.

Now, not shown in these photographs is the reaction of the locals. Hanslope Road is a busy thoroughfare for Castlethorpe. Traffic comes to a halt. People are getting out of their cars to help. One woman runs to the front door of the farm house to make them aware of their farm animal's woolly get-away. These lost sheep have disrupted people's lives. The serenity of the sheep's peaceful, safe life is disrupted. It is a chaos for all involved.

Joanna and I eventually make the left turn and continue to Hanslope, where we get our cup of tea. We tell our story to Liz while sipping our tea and have a good laugh. [PAUSE next slide please - Sheep 101]

Now, sheep are noted frequently in the Bible partly because they were so well known. People primarily lived an agrarian life and sheep were important to them. That was true in Old and New Testament times. All were familiar with sheep behavior, the good and the bad stories about them were easily related to their own lives.

So let's look at them a little more closely and see how sheep behavior relates directly to us and our relationship to God.

- Sheep are not concerned for their safety. They tend to wander away from their safe sanctuaries, where they are protected by their shepherd. The shepherd will go look for them and get them to come back to the fold. We as God's sheep are known to wander away, but we are always welcome back. No sin or regret is too great to overcome.
- Sheep respond to the voice of their shepherd. That is important as they have no direction (as shown in the prior 2 slides). They can come back to the safety afforded by the shepherd who guides their way.
- Sheep are weak. They cannot outrun a serious predator, such as a pack of wolves. They also have no real protection - no fangs or sharp hooves. They need the protection offered by the shepherd, which includes their staying with their flock for comfort. The staff carried by the shepherd can be used to defend the sheep. It is also used to guide the sheep, pointing them into the right direction for their safety and care. A gentle prod of the staff will keep sheep in line, a reminder to behave as the flock needs to behave. If we are willing to listen, God gives us direction as he moves our hearts into action.
- Sheep can become restless. They are OK when they have plenty of food and peaceful waters, but remove those basic life essentials and they grow anxious. We grow anxious when life gets tough, but we need to trust the shepherd when we encounter these problems. Our life essentials are assured with our shepherd.
- Each sheep is precious to their shepherd. That is why the shepherd will leave a flock to find the ones missing and bring them back to the fold. There are no unimportant sheep. All must be looked after. Christ looks after each one of us. None of us are unimportant to him.

- Sheep need plenty of water and still water at that. [upper right photo] They will not drink out of a rushing stream. The shepherd makes sure that is available in abundance and will guide them to it. For us, that means living water in Christ, as related in the story of the woman at the well.
- Sheep are gregarious. They need to be around one another. The community of sheep helps keep them at peace. Much like we enjoy coming to church for worship and fellowship, we stay at peace as we assure ourselves of our heavenly shepherd.
- Sheep will only follow the voice of their shepherd. No one else will do. The shepherd's gentle call keeps them all safe, provided they listen to what he has to say. We too need to listen to how God is calling us to do his will.
- Sheep cannot get up by themselves if they fall down and do not have all 4 feet on the ground. [lower left photo] They have no capacity to roll over and get themselves on their feet. It takes their shepherd to pick them up and place them back on their feet. Isn't that what Christ does for us when we are knocked down by life's circumstances?
- Sheep are not clean animals. Their wool is full of lanolin, dust and dirt. Their shepherd cleans them. Sheering, whether the sheep like it or not, keeps them safe. [lower right photo] Christ cleans us of our sins through his death on the cross.

We get more insight from our scripture reading today. In Psalm 100 God considers the faithful as "his people, and the sheep of his pasture." The pasture refers to his kingdom, as during this time kings were frequently referred to as shepherds of their people. It is a pasture of trust, a pasture of love, a pasture of eternal life. It is the shepherd's voice they all want to hear, a comforting voice echoed throughout the Bible.

In Ezekiel, we have a different set of circumstances. The people of Israel and Judah are recently exiled from their home in Jerusalem. To a large extent they got to this position because their earthly shepherds, the kings of Israel and Judah, led them astray. Many people like Ezekiel remained faithful to God, even though they were deported to Babylon as well. For those who remain faithful, God takes over as their shepherd. He promises to bring his sheep back to their land. He will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in its ravines and their pastures will be good. God will personally tend to them. He will bring back the lost sheep to their home, scattered though they may be now.

Ezekiel goes on to caution the sheep. God is going to judge them. The sheep that got fat by oppressing others will get their justice. God will put them under a new shepherd, one from the house of David who will tend for them.

That shepherd is Jesus and it is his words we read today from Matthew. This is eternal judgment announced by Christ. We are going to be separated. Those who are more like sheep get to be on the right side of God, those who are more like goats are on the left and are about to get eternal damnation. Did you catch the criteria Christ is going to use to make that decision? It is how we treat others less fortunate than ourselves. Did we feed the hungry? Did we give water to the thirsty? Did we invite a stranger in? Did we clothe the naked? Did we tend to the sick? Did we visit the prisoner in jail? When we do this, we do it in a spirit of doing it for Christ. It does not have to be for Christ the individual. It can be for anyone who is in more dire need than you. We gain eternal life by being the humble sheep, sheep that follow their shepherd in a flock.

So, *fellow sheep*, remember your shepherd. Follow his voice as he moves your conscience to do his will on Earth. [next slide please] Do not be a lost sheep wandering around on your own, trying to figure out life by yourself, making wrong turns, putting yourself in harm's way. Be a found sheep in the hands of the eternal shepherd [next slide please]. There is plenty of protection with this shepherd. Let Christ guide you to the still waters and abundant pastures for eternity.

Amen

Prayer Concerns

Benediction:

Let us go out into the world motivated by the good news that Christ is our new life. Let us be the sheep God wants us to be. Serve others less fortunate. Make someone else's life better. Show the light of Christ in your heart. May the grace, love and peace of Jesus Christ be with all of you, now and forever. Go in peace, knowing we have a new life in Christ to do his will on Earth. Amen.