

Jesus tells us this morning that he is our shepherd. He is the one who we are called to follow as his disciples in this world. His is the voice of the shepherd that we will recognize if we take the time each day to build a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus used the image of a shepherd to describe himself because Israel's prophets had used the image of the shepherd to describe God's relationship with Israel. When the prophet Isaiah sought to comfort the exiled people of Israel during the Babylonian exile, he wrote that God would *feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.* (Isaiah 40:11) In Psalm 23 we hear: *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.*

So the people that Jesus is addressing in the scripture passage this morning knew the image of God as their shepherd. Jesus now claims that image as his own. Shepherds lived with their flocks and protected them from danger. They led their sheep because sheep, unlike cattle, will not be driven but only led. Once they are in the pasture that their shepherd has led them into they will stay there and not wander. They will overgraze an area and it is up to the shepherd to lead them to greener pastures. As followers of Jesus Christ we are his sheep and need to follow him to new pastures. If we attempt to do only those things that make us comfortable as a church and not reach out or accept change we will be like the sheep who overgraze the pasture. We will be in a rut and not grow as a church.

This past year has been a time of change as we have dealt with the pandemic. Our way of being church had to change. We couldn't gather physically together for months. So we met virtually online through FB and zoom meetings. A year ago I had never heard of Zoom. Now we are meeting via zoom all the time! We are using it for our Children's Formation each Sunday and Bible study to name just two. Our Bible study has more people in attendance on zoom than when we met in person. The City Health Department has used our parking lot for COVID testing several times now. We have called and emailed to stay in touch with each other. Sunday mornings we are beginning to regather, but we still have restrictions on how to be together for worship. As we move through this summer and into next fall we will be deciding what needs to remain on zoom and live streaming. We aren't going back to our old pastures! Church will be different!

Jesus will lead us into new pastures, new ways of being church and reaching out to our neighbors. Jesus said that *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.* As the church, we are called to be open to new opportunities to reach out and bring other people to know Jesus Christ for themselves. I've heard about our Thanksgiving Event in the fall that is held outside on our grounds, but I haven't experienced it yet because of the pandemic. Perhaps this is one way that Jesus will use our church to reach out to the neighborhood in new ways this fall. If we listen to Jesus, our shepherd he will lead us to new pastures, new ways of being church.

The sheep know their shepherd's voice. We are to listen for the voice of our shepherd. Bibian Mukoro was telling us at Bible study last week how growing up her parents had sheep. In the evening her father would go out and call the flock and lead them home, but sometimes some of the sheep wouldn't be paying attention. They were distracted and didn't hear the shepherd's

voice so they got left behind. It was when the shepherd went back and called their names that they came running to him. We have so many voices calling to us in our society today. Social media is constantly demanding our attention. Politicians attempt to tell us who to follow. We have so many distractions that attempt to lead us astray. Jesus calls us to listen for his voice in the midst of our daily lives. But we have to pay attention and be ready to hear his voice. We do that through daily prayer and reading of scripture. We may say that we don't have the time, but we can make the time if it is a priority in our lives. Our prayer may simply be, "Lord help me to listen to you." It is our intention, our desire to follow Jesus that is important. Jesus, the good shepherd will find us in our daily life and guide us in our actions if we focus on him.

Preach the Gospel at all times use words if necessary. Jesus showed his disciples how to proclaim the kingdom of God. As we heard last week, we are Christ's witnesses in the world, we are the present Body of Christ in this place. How we lay down our lives, surrendering ourselves to God's will in our lives, will show that we are disciples of Christ. We, as Christ the King, are Jesus' flock. How we help others physically and spiritually will show God's love to our world. How we offer hospitality to others and include them in our flock is God's love in action. Jesus calls us to offer a place where all are welcome and included. Deciding who is in the flock is God's business, not ours!

Encountering Jesus changed people's lives. The community that Jesus built was open and inclusive. Jesus broke down societal barriers and norms. He asked his disciples to do the same. When the writer of 1John says, lay down your life for one another, he is saying surrender to what God has in store for us, not following our own desires and expectations. We are to get out of the way and listen to Jesus' voice. The good shepherd knows his sheep. Sheep will not be driven, they only respond to being led. Jesus led the way with his own life, death and resurrection. There is nowhere that Jesus will lead us that he has not gone himself. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.* It may not be what we desire, but it will be what we as individuals and a church need. Jesus will lead us there if we listen to his voice. He is our shepherd. He has promised us new life in him. However Jesus asks us to surrender to God's will, it will always lead us to new life in Christ. Thanks be to God!