

**He Will Lead Us Out**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**17 April 2005**  
**Text: John 10:1-10**

Even over the telephone, I heard the decided catch in the church member's voice as he told me of the birth of his first grandchild, a daughter born to his daughter. "She is so incredibly beautiful," he exclaimed, chuckling in recognition that he had already taken his place among the universal association of grandparents with incredibly beautiful grandchildren. "It is amazing to watch my daughter and son-in-law as conscientious parents, and see their protective love for this incredibly beautiful new life."

He is to be forgiven the superlatives of a proud grandpa. There is nothing like a newborn baby to renew one's heart. A life at the beginning, full of promise, full of hope. Poet and historian Carl Sandberg noted that a baby is God's declaration that the world should go on, and so it does. But not far below the surface of that affirmation is a recognition of the vulnerability of life. A baby is utterly dependent upon adults to feed and care for her, to provide for her needs and nurture. Whether as a parent or grandparent or friend, when you hold a baby in your arms, you cannot help but wonder where life will lead this child. For all its breathtaking wonder, sweet connections, and headlong joys, life outside the playpen is also dangerous. Growing up inevitably brings every dear baby—every one of us—to rocky paths, dark shadowed valleys, and frightening abysses. We want to shield our beloved from everything that threatens his well-being; but part of the terror is the realization that we cannot, entirely, or forever.

The gospel reading for today uses a pastoral metaphor to describe a source of protection in the face of uncertainty beyond human capability. It is reminiscent of the twenty-third Psalm and the shepherd who "maketh me lie down in green pastures, and leadeth me beside still waters...and restoreth my soul." This text is of course the most requested one for funerals and memorial services because of its comforting familiarity and its promise of God's presence "in the valley of the shadow of death." Despite the richness of the seventeenth century King James' English, however, that phrase is a mistranslation of the Hebrew. The more accurate meaning is not the "valley of the shadow of death" but rather "the valley of deep darkness," a place we find ourselves often, at many different stages of our lives before we face that final good night.

The community to which the gospel of John was originally addressed was one widely persecuted and ridiculed. What had started as the Jesus movement, little more than a sect within the larger umbrella of Judaism, had by the end of the first century grown and developed a particular identity. The early Church's interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry brought it into conflict with religious and civil authorities. Defectors from within and intense pressure from the outside threatened to hurt and divide the young community. In the face of such difficulty, what could they count on? Where could they turn for guidance, protection, leadership? Listen for God's word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter at the first verse [found on page \_\_\_\_\_ of the chapel/pew Bibles].  
[JOHN 10:1-10]

In the church I attended as a child, there was a painting in the hall around the primary classrooms called "The Good Shepherd," showing a man in biblical garb surrounded by a flock of sheep. He had a shepherd's crook in one hand that my teacher Mrs. Garret had taught us could be very useful for guiding the sheep, or gently pulling them by the neck out of a dangerous spot. With his other hand the man cradled a lamb which he had obviously rescued from some perilous place in his arms. It was a nice picture, and we all understood that "the Good Shepherd" was Jesus, and we were his little lambs (that same picture hangs in our Sunday School hallway too!). I never really thought much about sheep imagery until my first call to ministry took me to rural Iowa. You may think of Iowa as the state where corn is king and there are contests to determine who shall reign as pork queen, and you would be correct. But in the southeast corner of Iowa the topography is too hilly and the soil is too poor for the kind of bumper crops you see on either side of Interstate 80, so they raise sheep. I learned a lot about sheep during my time there, and one thing I learned is that sheep are not the brightest of animals. They are difficult to herd; they are dirty; they are vulnerable to disease and infestation. Unlike even the lowly cow, they are basically incapable of ferreting out food for themselves unless they're standing right on it. They have to be led to "still waters" because they'll die of thirst for fear of drinking from a moving stream. These facts sort of ruined the sheep metaphor for me. I don't want to draw too many correlations between these -excuse me- dumb animals and the smart, funny, capable human beings Jesus loves and calls to follow.

It's worth setting aside the problems with this metaphorical language, however, to understand the reality behind it. Differences between biblical times and today notwithstanding, the shepherd/sheep metaphor is intended to describe a relationship of trust and caring. The shepherd knows the sheep and calls each by name.

They respond because they recognize the familiar voice, and follow the single voice they know can be trusted. William Sloan Coffin has observed that biblical sheep imagery is Eastern, not Western in orientation; it's about being, not doing. It points to a relationship between God and humanity in which God desires only good for the flock, and the flock relies wholly on God. *The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.*

In our text, the language shifts from God as the good shepherd to Jesus as the gate for the sheep, the door through which they pass both for the protective shelter of the sheepfold and the nourishment of the pastureland. It's a little confusing, but makes the same point: whether leading the way, or as the way itself, God provides what is necessary for life, abundant life: rich, purposeful, joy-filled life. This is in contrast to "thieves and bandits" who threaten the flock. Christian faith is not naïve about human life, but acknowledges the reality of evil which seeks to work its worst in the world. The text doesn't specifically identify these threats, but it doesn't take much imagination to find evidence of their terrible consequences: war, poverty, terrorism, fear, despair. The *Plain Dealer* photograph of two grief-stricken mourners at the funeral this week of a young boy struck down by gang violence in our city offers one more example, heart-breaking to behold. How do we explain the failure to protect eleven-year-old Brandon Davis?

Could it be, my friends, that we have misunderstood the protective care of the good Shepherd? Have we imagined that the sheepfold is a gated community, cut off from the wild world, locked against elements that would steal and kill and destroy? But the picture here is a sheepfold with a door that opens both ways: the shepherd calls them in and leads them out....sometimes to green pastures and still water, but sometimes into those dark shadowed valleys of human pain and vulnerability. We follow not because we're stupid sheep, but because we trust the Shepherd who leads us there to rescue the vulnerable, to guide to safety those who are lost, to feed and nourish ones who are hungry and lonely. Notice that Psalm 23 doesn't say "I will have no fear," but that "I will fear no evil;" I will not fear that evil will triumph; I will not fear that the forces of death are stronger than those of good; I will not fear that life is for nothing. . . . *because God is with me.* The sheep are realistic about the very real dangers of human life. But they are even more realistic about the shepherd. The trust of the shepherd overrides the dangers outside the sheepfold.

Friends, the conviction that we are not alone is the secret to abundant living. We spend a great deal of energy trying to make life secure and much of it serves primarily to isolate us from other people.

The strongest lock, the best security system, the most secluded gated community –none of these will ultimately guard our lives and the lives of the people will love. What will secure our lives is our trust in God's utter reliability, in God's good intent for us and all people, and God's certain presence leading and guiding us to abundance.

We saw an amazing example of this trust in an incident that began with serious threat. An escaped prisoner –who had been convicted of murder and rape—forced a young woman to harbor him in her apartment. During fearsome hours when she had no idea of the outcome, Ashley Smith talked to her captor, getting to know him, and sharing something of her own life. She spoke to him of God and read him portions of the best-selling Christian devotional book "The Purpose Driven Life." She made him a meal of scrambled eggs. . . .and ultimately convinced him to turn himself in. One commentator wrote that this was not simply a spiritual encounter, it was an encounter with the living God (*Andrew Sullivan, in Time magazine, March 28, 2005*). Smith is a remarkable witness to the power of God's presence which enables us to face insecurity and raw threat with calm trust and compassionate service.

Though her story is especially compelling, we don't really have to go that far to find persuasive examples of people who serve in brave ways because they sense a calling to do so. They might not express it in explicitly religious language, but I believe they are so moved because they trust a power greater than their own. I see signs of that radical trust among you every day: with family members who allow their dying loved one to go because they trust God's care in life and in death; in busy members who accept nomination to the leadership team of this church, or who offer time and energy to teach Sunday School, extend hospitality to homeless guests, serve as Stephen ministers, address persistent problems that admit to no easy solutions, invest financial resources on programs and projects whose beneficial outcomes are yet ahead. You are part of the witness that makes me unafraid when I hold a newborn and imagine her future. She belongs to God. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow her all the days of her life, and she shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Friends, beloved Fairmount flock, welcome to the fold. You have been called by God into this sanctuary, a safe place where God's presence is experienced. But the Good Shepherd will also lead you and me out, into a world of hurt and happiness, of pain and promise. Go there, relying on the One who will provide for every need. Go there, in the certain knowledge that you are never alone. Go there, to join the Shepherd in redeeming work that will one day bring every one safely home.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor