

Acts 4:5-12

May 3 2009

Psalm 23

4th of Easter

John 10:11-18

"Who's Your Leader?"

When I was a child I recall seeing sci-fi movies in which aliens landed on earth and demanded of bewildered earthlings, "Take me to your leader." Who or what is our leader?

Graduates of high school go off to college or enter the workplace and perhaps get their first taste of adult freedom. They may face a smorgasbord of lifestyle options. It can be a confusing array. What does one believe? Who can one follow? Do I need a leader to follow at all? Am I not enough for myself? Who can you trust anyway? Or take the case of a young person, well educated, attractive, and successful in his/her career. Then comes those nagging uncertainties. Privately she/he might say, "What is the meaning of all this? I'm not sure that my beliefs are real. Who should I follow?" Others have reached their career or life goals or acquired all the things they desired, then ask "Why am I not happy?" Give a man everything he desires, and yet at this very moment he will feel that everything is not everything.¹

Who or what shall be my leader? Who is your leader? That is the question behind our yearning and uncertainty. That is why presidential campaigns engender so much interest. People hope for a leader who is better than the previous one; or one who fulfills our yearnings.

Christ quietly answers that he is the true leader. Our Scripture readings today abound with the imagery of sheep and shepherd. The shepherd/king was a common image in the ancient world. Hammurabi, king of ancient Babylon, was called the shepherd of his people. Psalm 80 speaks of God as shepherd and Psalm 23 uses this same imagery. The concept of the shepherd as leader and nurturer was strong in the Old Testament and continued as a description of God in Christian circles. Naturally, the followers are the sheep. Many of us don't like to think of ourselves as sheep. They are essentially dumb animals. But the point of this image (as used in the Bible) is that sheep are community builders; they need one another and they need a shepherd. When we engage in spreading discontent and disunion we're not building community. Rather we're aiding any wolves that might appear at the door. Sheep need one another; *and* they need to have a good shepherd; a shepherd who is a community builder – something quite different than a community organizer.

At various stages in life all people – even leaders themselves - select leaders; either as directors of organizations, governments, or as models for thinking,

¹Immanuel Kant, philosopher.

acting, and living. Who we select as our leader has a critical impact on the course of our life.

You've heard of counting sheep as a method to help us go to sleep. Counting them makes them into abstract objects until they blur into a stream of fluffy, repetitive creatures. That's fine for sleeping but the trouble with abstract thinking is that when we make an abstraction out of reality it loses some of its meaning. At the heart of the Christian faith is an Absolute Principle, which is at the same time a Person. A person who cares for the sheep of his flock and has sacrificed himself for them. He is the true one, amid false shepherds.

In Jesus' day the *hired* shepherd had an unsavory reputation, not to be completely trusted. He might increase his own flock at the expense of the owner. When danger threatened the hireling might very well flee, leaving the flock unprotected. He was less a good shepherd than one who sheared or fleeced the flock. We have seen many such false shepherds in our day; and television has given both the political and religious types great influence. They count on sheep being dumb or at least uninformed

False shepherds have no desire to honestly know the sheep; they see them as numbers. False shepherds have no concern for the safety of the sheep; just their own ambitions. Haven't we seen and heard leaders who proclaim their great concern for "the people," yet as time goes by, their concern appears to be more for the peoples' money? The true shepherd cares for the sheep and knows the sheep. "If you want a picture of success, as heaven measures it, don't look for blaring bands on Broadway. Listen rather to the sound of water splashing into a basin while God incarnate, in a humility that makes angels hold their breath, sponges the grime from the feet of his undeserving disciples."²

The shepherds with whom Christ was familiar knew their sheep individually, and so must we. When we talk about our attendance here we're not counting sheep. [That's why nametags are important. Each name represents the person.] Each person who comes in these doors is a real personal who we want to have the opportunity to meet the Great Shepherd. In a sense, each one of us here is not only a sheep of His flock, but also shepherds welcoming others.

That Great Shepherd is our leader and model. He leads the flock to new pastures for them to find life. He teaches us we can't be maintainers, looking after what is already in place and afraid to move on. If there is no movement the flock receives no nourishment. Shepherds must inspire, convince, model, paint a picture, and give us a vision.

An old proverb says, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." Coercion is the method of those who have no spiritual power, and false authority can only *force* people to follow. But Christ, the Good Shepherd, *wins* our confidence and glad obedience. The late Dr. Wallace Hamilton, novelist and

²Dr. Paul Reese

playwright, liked to tell of an Indian sheep farmer who had a big problem. His neighbor's dogs were killing his sheep. It got so bad that he had to do something. So he examined his options. He could have brought a lawsuit and taken his neighbor to court. He could have built stronger fences so the dogs couldn't get in. But he had a better idea. He gave some lambs to his neighbor's children. When those lambs began to multiply and their little flocks began to develop, the neighbor tied up the dogs and his problems were over. As Jesus said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons and daughters of God."³

We must dare to follow Him, for the stakes are exceedingly high. This is not simply a contest among world religions to gain converts. It's more than a struggle between religion and secular values. It is a matter of life and death. We have seen enough history to know that false leaders who come with grand promises often leave us worse off than before. The Apostle Peter, speaking before the rulers and religious leaders of Israel, said, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." How many of us pull back from this? Many Christians today want to be broad minded and accepted in a pluralistic society, so they shy away from such exclusive talk. It's easier to slide into a relativism of religions: "Good to have a religion, but which one doesn't matter."

Yet the Bible's proclamation that there is no salvation outside of Christ underlies our mission to be a church. We *do* have a message to proclaim. And we better proclaim it with our deeds as well as our words. When we give of our time, our money, and our energy for Christ's sake we send a strong message of hope to all those around us. When we invite someone to meet the Great Shepherd we offer them fullness of life and life eternal. We can claim salvation in Christ because only Christ has been raised from the dead. Only he has passed through death to our final destiny. Therefore we can attain our final destiny only through him. The tombs of all the religious leaders, prophets, and philosophers are occupied. Christ's tomb is empty. [This is where resurrection rubber meets the road. If Christ has not been raised from the dead then we are fools. But, in fact, he has been raised and will give us new life.]

We don't come to church to count sheep, but to talk to the Great Shepherd! Christ said, "if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. I came that they may have life and have it in its fullness." *That* is something worth inviting others to! There is profound theology in the words of the little girl who began to recite the 23rd Psalm "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want."

Those who seek a full life will be called by this Crucified One, whom we know as the True Shepherd. Those who follow the True Shepherd will find true life.

³Hal Brady, Dallas, TX, "Making Order out of Chaos"