

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you hear about the five-year old boy named Timmy? His mother was concerned about her kindergarten son walking to school alone. He didn't want his mother to walk with him. She wanted to give him the feeling that he had some independence, yet know that he was safe. So she had an idea how to handle it. The mother asked a neighbor if she would please follow him to school in the mornings, staying at a distance, so he probably wouldn't notice her. The neighbor said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed.

The next school day, the neighbor and her little girl set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbor girl he knew named Susie. The neighbor did this for the whole week.

As the two kindergarteners walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, Susie noticed the same lady was following them every day all week. Finally she said to Timmy, "Have you noticed that lady following us to school all week? Do you know her?"

Timmy nonchalantly replied, "Yeah, I know who she is."

The little girl said, "Well, who is she?"

"That's just Shirley Goodnest," Timmy replied, "and her daughter, Marcy."

"Shirley Goodnest? Who is she and why is she following us?"

"Well," Timmy explained, "every night my mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers, 'cuz she worries about me so much. And in the Psalm, it says, 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life', so I guess I'll just have to get used to it!"

That's a good story, but I don't know if it's true. Here's a true story about the song "Surely Goodness and Mercy." John W. Peterson and Albert B. Smith collaborated on that gospel song in 1958. John Peterson was an Army Air Force pilot who flew the famous "China Hump" in World War II. He said he was thinking about how he gave thanks for the Good Shepherd guiding him through those dangerous air missions. Remembering how the song came about, he wrote, "One day while improvising at the piano in my studio, Albert B. Smith, with whom I was associated at the time, walked in. For no particular reason that I can remember, we started to develop a new song. I would come up with a thought, then Al. In a short time, 'Surely Goodness and Mercy' was born." Albert Smith had this memory about how the song came to be: "It was written after receiving a letter from one of the descendants of Philip Bliss telling of Bliss's first country school teacher, named Miss Murphy, whom he dearly loved. It told about her teaching the class (before they could read or write) to memorize the 23rd

Psalm. When the part ‘surely goodness and mercy’ was reached, little Philip thought it said ‘surely good Miss Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life.’ This little incident focused our thoughts on the phrase which became the heart and title of the song.”¹

When I was growing up, we lived in New Orleans, Birmingham, Nashville, and Atlanta, among several other places throughout the south. I am a city boy. But after having lived in Duplin County for twenty years, I have learned a lot about pork and poultry. However, I still don’t know much about sheep. Nevertheless, I am getting something of an ovine education courtesy of Jean Parks. Her son, Spencer, and his wife live on a farm in Oregon, where Spencer is the director of the Menucha Retreat Center. On a regular basis, at Wednesday morning Bible study or in Opening Assembly on Sunday morning, Jean brings me up to date on the new animals on Spencer’s farm, especially the sheep.

This past Wednesday, as we talked about John 10 and the Good Shepherd, Jean told us about lambing season and how Spencer has learned to shear the sheep. Someone asked, “What do they do with the wool?” Jean said they have it cleaned and spun into thread. Then Jean said, “The sheep are so pretty and white after they’ve been sheared.” I turned to Jean and asked, “Why are they so pretty and white **after** they’ve been sheared?” and Jean said, “Because all of the dirt has been sheared away.”

Jean’s comment got me thinking about the Good Shepherd and us dirty sheep. Let me ask you to do something we did in Bible study on Wednesday morning. See if you can conjure up a picture in your mind of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Maybe it’s the classic picture that hangs on so many Sunday School room walls. Maybe it’s a beautiful stained glass window from the church you grew up in. Do you have it in your mind? What do you see? What does the little lamb look like? When I asked Bible study folks that question on Wednesday morning, someone said, “The little lamb is clean.” Then she went on to say, “I always take comfort in thinking that the Good Shepherd has picked me up and cleaned me up.”

Like I said, I don’t know much about sheep, but my guess is, sheep aren’t pretty and white and clean most of the time. And if that’s the case, it must be true that the shepherd has to get down in the muck and the mire where the sheep are. John 10 and Psalm 23 bring us great comfort and peace, because of the pastoral images they offer: green pastures, still waters, soul restoration, walking on right paths, comfort, goodness and mercy following forever, knowing the shepherd and the shepherd knowing his sheep.

But the language of John 10 and Psalm 23 implies why we need a Good Shepherd. The shepherd has to find green grass and clean water for the sheep. The shepherd has to lead the sheep on safe paths because of the many dangers that are lurking. The shepherd has to protect the sheep from the wolves that strike. The shepherd has to work at keeping the flock together.

Since I don’t know much about sheep, I did a little research online, and came across a fascinating photo essay from last fall’s edition of *The Atlantic*. The article is called “The Shepherds of the Tusheti Mountains,” and begins, “Every autumn, a spectacular animal migration takes place in Georgia’s Tusheti region in the northern Cauca-

sus Mountains. Radio Free Europe photographer Amos Chapple recently joined a group of shepherds and their dogs on what he refers to as a 'deadly, boozy journey' from the steep mountains to the plains, as they brought their 1,200 sheep down to their winter pastures."

Here's a sampling of some of the captions to the magnificent photos:

* "On the road towards the formidable 9,190 ft high Abano Pass. The morning is spent winding through the alpine lakes and watching for the rocks that occasionally clatter down the cliffs."

* "Georgian Shepherd dogs are a tough, ancient breed who help keep the sheep in formation and protect them from wolves."

* "The climb to Abano Pass is regarded as one of the most dangerous on Earth."

* "The flock stretches along a narrow road. The Georgian Shepherd dogs that help herd them are bred to be the same color and size as the sheep they protect. From a distance, it's impossible to spot the dogs, meaning all flocks are treated with caution by the wolves which stalk the migration."

* "As the sheep and shepherds climb, the rain turns to sleet, and then snow. a buffeting wind tugs at the flock as they crest the pass. With no shelter to be had, the flock push ahead. The animals need to get to the relative warmth of the lower altitudes as quickly as possible."

* "As the sheep enter the tree line, they plunge straight down the slopes that, from above, look impossibly steep. As the daylight disappears, the exhausted flock files down the last sections of the day."

* "Once the sheep sit down from injury or exhaustion they quickly die of exposure. Some are also picked off by wolves, or by passing locals who take them straight for slaughter."²

The photo essay is a good parable for life. What are the formidable passes you have to cross? Where are the tumbling rocks? Who are the wolves that stalk? What storms are you having to weather? Are you trying to find your way down dark and dangerous paths in the dark? Are you injured and exhausted?

Here are some interesting thoughts about our Good Shepherd and the difference he can make in our lives: "Following the Good Shepherd all the way to the cross means knowing, not only in our minds but in our very guts, security in the face of danger, joy that crowds out sorrow and love that overwhelms fear. It means being led along paths we would not choose for ourselves. It means being prodded by the shepherd who knows our needs

better than we do. Being one of Jesus' flock does not mean that death will not come, that tragedy will not strike, that our hearts will not be broken. It means that whatever befalls us, we may sing this psalm, too: Even though I walk through the corridors of the ICU, I will not fear death...Though I pass through the valleys of depression or delusion, I will not be alone...Though people may taunt me or shun me, I will not lose heart...Though I may sleep in doorways on cardboard boxes, I will fear no evil.... For you anoint me...guard me...love me.... Jesus is the shepherd: he leads us to lives of abundant grace. Jesus is the gate: he places himself between us and all that

would destroy our faith and take away our true humanity. Jesus is the lamb: he chose to follow the path that led to death but resulted in life. He submitted himself in order to reveal God's [very] self."³

The classic picture of gentle Jesus carrying the clean, white, fluffy lamb in his arms brings us great comfort, just as the pastoral images of the 23rd Psalm and the reassuring words, "I am the good shepherd" do. But the reason these scriptures bring us such comfort is because Jesus, our Good Shepherd, walks through the mud and muck we sheep leave behind, and reaches down to lift us up.

And "he has two fine collie dogs, Goodness and Mercy. With him before and them behind, even poor sinners like you and me can hope to win home at last."⁴

Savior, like a Shepherd lead us, Much we need thy tender care.

Let us pray: Lord, we pray that we might hear the call from our Good Shepherd and follow his way of love. We make all our prayers in Christ's name. Amen.

NOTES

¹This information about "Surely Goodness and Mercy" was taken from two sources. (1) Pastor Phil Layton, "The Two Sheep Dogs that Always Pursue Me (Psalm 23:6)" July 18, 2010 at www.goldcountrybaptist.org and (2) Enid and Austin Bhebe, "Surely Goodness and Mercy," January 9, 2013 at www.austinbhebe.wordpress.com.

²Alan Taylor, "The Shepherds of the Tusheti Mountains," October 31, 2017 at www.theatlantic.com.

³Rev. Jennifer Browne, sermon, "But We Are Not Sheep," March 30, 2014 at www.universitychurchhome.org/sermon-archive/2014/3/30/but-we-are-not-sheep.

⁴Scottish preacher