

Advent 2023

Jesus, Tender Shepherd, Hear Me: "Come with Your Staff"

Text: Matthew 9:35-36

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

***Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me. [Psalm 23](#)***

Dear Fellow Sheep – you who long and pray for the return of the Good Shepherd:

For the countless souls that have been won during this past year, we thank our God and acknowledge the compassion and wisdom of the delay of his Second Coming. Yet we also acknowledge again this evening that God's patience and mercy must never become Satan's tools; that is, Satan must never be allowed to turn God's mercy and goodness into an excuse for man to doubt or to lose patience. This is the great danger that threatens all Christians as we wait for our Lord's return.

Time is the key here, isn't it? God grants us time to reach those who are now lost, while the devil tries to use that same element of time to lull us into a self-indulgent stupor. This is one of the great dangers we address during our Advent Services. This year the theme for these services centers around that simple, child-like prayer that many of us were taught from infancy: "*Jesus, Tender Shepherd, hear me!*" This evening we ask our Tender Shepherd to hear as we ask him to come to us with his shepherd's staff.

Our devotion this evening will be based on the word of God recorded in Matthew, Chapter 9:

ESV [Matthew 9:35-36](#) "And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

This is God's Word – words that God gave us to clarify our thoughts and to increase our understanding and appreciation for all that he has done for us in the past and will do for us in the future. That our God would continue to bless us this evening by the power of his Word, so we pray, "***Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.***" Amen.

Do you remember the Old Alan Jackson song "*Little Bitty*"? As secular songs go, the message was actually pretty solid – a testament against material excess and a reminder that happiness isn't achieved by the accumulation of "stuff." During our midweek Advent services we are essentially applying that same "*It's alright to be little bitty*" to our relationship with our God. It is inexplicably easy for us to get too big for our britches when it comes to our relationship with our Creator – imagining that we have some sort of peer relationship with the Almighty. We don't. Not even close, which is the reason many Christians continue to use that same childhood prayer as adults: "*Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me; bless Thy little lamb tonight...*"

Human beings typically have a much different image of ourselves than the reality that God sees. In fact our self-image (how we see ourselves) probably only approaches anything close to reality when tragedy enters our lives and knocks away every false prop and prideful illusion of inner, human strength. It is at such times that we are given a more accurate view – a self-image of lambs, rather than lions.

Part of the problem is our selective hearing. We often hear only part of what our God tells us. We do this in many ways, but the particular problem area that we address this evening is when we hear our God tell us things like "*Be strong!*" and "*Fear not!*" and "*Be bold and courageous!*" and we focus on

that one thought to the exclusion of what *always* follows. What follows is always the "how and why" – our God telling us *how and why* we can and should be bold, courageous, strong, and confident. God never says, "*Be courageous because you are strong or able or powerful.*" He says, "*Be confident, strong, and courageous because I, your God, am all those things.*"

In Isaiah 35:4, for example, we read: "***Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.'***" Again in Isaiah 41:8-10: "***But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; ⁹ you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off'; ¹⁰ fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.***"

Note that it is always, "*Don't be afraid – not because of you but because of me.*" Paul summed it all up in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10: "***So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.***"

The point is that since man has strength only in God, the appearance or façade of human strength serves only to confuse or mask reality. The truth is only really and clearly seen when man's illusion of power and potency is removed. The fact is man, on his own, always fails. So also the Holy Spirit through the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 146:5-6: "***Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶ who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever.***"

God sees us differently than we see ourselves. He sees us at all times like Jesus saw the crowds that came to him in our text for this evening. Note that the simile in our text was not that those who came to Jesus were *like* those who "***were harassed and helpless,***" they *were* the "***harassed and helpless.***" The simile was that they were "***like sheep without a shepherd.***" Yet because they *were* the "***diseased and afflicted***" and the "***sheep without a shepherd,***" the people in our text recognized their own helplessness and need. The fact that they understood their own helplessness caused them to seek an outside source of strength, comfort, and healing. They looked to Jesus.

All of this helps to set the stage for what we are asking this evening when we pray, "*Jesus, Tender Shepherd, hear me,*" and why we ask him to come to us with his staff.

Last week we asked our Shepherd to come with his rod, and we were reminded that the shepherd's rod was used for both the defense of the flock and for the loving chastisement of the sheep themselves. Our tendency to wander means that we desperately need the wise, loving discipline that only our Good Shepherd can provide.

This evening we seek from our Tender Shepherd the balance to the rod: his staff. In Old Testament times a shepherd's staff was used to guide, to separate, to gather, to comfort, and to rescue. All of these things we desperately need and therefore ask of our Savior.

Most are familiar with the shepherd's staff, the long wooden pole with a hook on the end. Since sheep tend to wander, a shepherd would use his staff to guide wandering lambs away from danger, or even just to prevent one of his little ones from taking the wrong path. Again, not hard to see how human beings need this same sort of guidance, but only when we acknowledge our "little lamb" status and relationship. Then we're not relying on self but on the One who has perfect knowledge, absolute strength, and total dedication to his little lambs.

Understand too that the shepherd also uses his staff to separate and to gather. Shepherds, so we are told, at times have to separate the lambs from their ewes at birth. The mothers can sometimes grow confused or disoriented and can actually pose a danger to their own young until they are calmed and settled.

Obviously we are not here asking our Good Shepherd to protect us from our disoriented mothers. Yet it does remind us that there are, and will always be, sudden and unexpected dangers in life. God alone has the ability to recognize and defend us from the unseen and unknown.

The fellowship principle is one way that our Good Shepherd employs his staff among us. While man tends to fear physical dangers above all else, spiritual dangers always pose an infinitely greater threat. Physical dangers harm the body, spiritual attack the soul. How foolish for God's sheep to suppose that our Shepherd should separate us from physical danger but do little or nothing about the far greater spiritual dangers – enemies that seek our eternal destruction.

Nor should we imagine that our shepherd has no concern for our associations in life. The fact is just as the staff was used to gather sheep, so our God gathers us into the protection of church families. This is the positive side of the fellowship principle – our God gathering us with like-minded believers for mutual support and protection.

Here's where the danger of the false "peer relationship" with God becomes evident, and why we need to recognize our true "little lamb" relationship. Human thoughts and emotions are every bit as reliable as drunken chickens. Those led by human thought and emotion routinely choose a church fellowship that makes them feel good, that seems to provide what they are looking for, and that affirms their preconceived notions of right and wrong. The Good Shepherd's staff guides us into fellowships that are pleasing *to him* – *because they afford genuine truth and spiritual safety*. Jesus warned us that his will for our relationships in life would be counterintuitive: **"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."** (Matthew 10:34-36) All is based on the wisdom and love of our Good Shepherd to separate us from all that is harmful and to gather us for protection with like-minded fellow Christians. Human beings, on our own, are neither qualified nor capable of such decisions, which is why as little lambs we ask our Good Shepherd to come to us with his staff and to guide and direct every single aspect of our lives, including our associations, according to his wisdom.

Remember finally that none of this exists in a vacuum; that is, all flows from our Shepherd's desire that we avoid the eternal torments of hell and exist in heaven with him for all eternity. All is centered in and finds its purpose and goal in Christ crucified. There is only one path to God's heaven – faith alone in Jesus Christ. Those who trust that Jesus paid the sum total of their debt of sin on Calvary's cross will be saved. All who reject will be eternally condemned. So also we petition our Savior this evening to come to us with his shepherd's staff, guiding us away from all that he recognizes as harmful to our souls, and gathering us instead into relationships that build up, strengthen, and protect. Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear us. Amen.