

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - May 12, 2019 – Sheep Psalm 23:1-6 and John 10:22-30

Weldon Phillip Keller grew up in Kenya, the son of missionary parents. He died in 1997, having authored 35 books on a variety of Christian subjects. As a young man, his primary employment for eight years was as a sheep owner and rancher. And it was from these experiences that he crafted the narrative for his most popular book called *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*.

There, Keller tells us that “sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves they will follow the same trails until they become ruts; graze the same hills until they turn to desert wastes; pollute their own ground until it is corrupt with disease and parasites.”¹ This is why the quality of the shepherd is so important. Some sheep are left to struggle for themselves - left to go their own way, left to the whims of their own destructive habits.²

In contrast, the wise shepherd understands that “no other class of livestock requires more careful handling, more detailed direction, than do sheep.”³ The good

¹ Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 70.

² *Ibid.*, 71.

³ *Ibid.*, 71.

shepherd “will go to no end of trouble and labor to supply the sheep with the finest grazing, the richest pasturage, ample winter feed, and clean water. The shepherd will spare no pains to provide shelter from the storms, protection from ruthless enemies and the diseases and parasites to which sheep are so susceptible.”⁴

Of course, none of this is easy. Psalm 23 says, “you make me lie down in green pastures.” But, sheep are anxious creatures who will not lie down unless four requirements are met. They must be, first, free of all fear. Second, free from friction with others of their kind. Third, if tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. And, finally, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food.⁵

Another common problem is that of a “cast” sheep. “Lying on its back, its feet in the air, a cast sheep flays away frantically struggling to stand up, without success. Sometimes it will bleat for help, but generally, it lies there lashing about in frightened frustration. If the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the sheep will die.”⁶

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

Do you recall the parable of the good shepherd who leaves the 99 in search of the one that is lost? Keller writes, “I would spend hours searching for a single sheep that was missing. Then more often than not I would see it at a distance, down on its back, lying helpless. At once I would start to run toward it - hurrying as fast as I could - for every minute was critical. Within me there was a mingled sense of fear and joy: fear that it might be too late; joy that it was found at all. As soon as I reached the cast ewe my very first impulse was to pick it up. Tenderly, I would roll the sheep over on its side.”⁷

Friends, have you ever received the care of a good shepherd? Someone who could draw alongside you and comfort you in your time of need? Someone who could calmly and patiently help you address whatever difficulty stood in your way? I imagine so. We are privileged to call them our friends. Our mothers and fathers. They are first responders, and teachers, and counselors, and medical professionals. I once sent a card to my veterinarian for the care that she extended to me following the difficult decision to euthanize a beloved pet.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

For a good shepherd, “there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing the sheep contented, well fed, safe, and flourishing.”⁸ So it is with God. And in reviewing the life of Jesus, we can see in him marks of the Good Shepherd. “The tenderness, the love, the patience that He used to restore Peter's soul after the terrible tragedy of his temptations is a classic picture of Christ coming to restore one of His own... quietly, gently, reassuringly... no matter when or where or how we may be cast down.”⁹

Today, we rightly set aside the time to honor the fine women who have shepherded us in this life. We know their voices, and we come when they call. At first, it is instinctual – the bond between a mother and her child. Later, instinct will become fused with deep admiration and trust. For these are the ones who lead us in right paths and restore our souls. They are with us in the darkest valleys, and they fill our lives with goodness and mercy. Time and time again, they lay down their lives for us. And so it is with God. Amen.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.