

The Life of the Led

Acts 9:36-43
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30
Psalm 23

If you have ever taken part in any kind of small group games, sometimes called low ropes or group initiatives, then you have probably done some sort of trust exercise. There are loads of different types and I've both participated in and led others through many. We won't attempt to do one this morning, but I do want to tell you about one of the most profound ones I've seen. The way it works is a group of about twelve people gets divided into teams of two. One teammate from each pair is lined up shoulder to shoulder with about 6' between each person at the far end of a room and is then blindfolded. Once blinded, the facilitators fill the room with obstacles like tables and chairs and ropes and all sorts of impediments. The seeing partners are then assembled at the near side of the room, opposite their partner. The blindfolded are then turned in circles and faced different directions. When the activity begins, the goal is for the seeing teammate to direct their blindfolded counterpart safely over to themselves. The first team finished is the winner. The only tool they have to accomplish the task is their voice. And as you can imagine, once the activity begins, the room gets loud as each person attempts to shout above the other voices. It's a test of one person's ability to communicate clear instructions and the other's ability to both hear and follow those instructions. Inevitably, folks bump into things, get told to go right when they are meant to go left, follow the wrong voice, or misinterpret what they hear, etc. It's chaotic, but fun. In the end, we debrief everyone's experience and it's a pretty powerful tool for learning about navigating this Christian life.

Today we hear Jesus' frustration with people who indicate a desire to know who he is, but either refuse or are unable to hear what he has been teaching. He says that his sheep will both listen to and follow the things that he says. In this world there are many voices vying

for our attention, our sight is limited, and circumstances can often leave us feeling disoriented. When these or other factors make people unable to recognize Jesus' voice, according to Jesus, it proves that they are not genuinely his sheep.

Following the leadership of the shepherd is one of the single most significant aspects of Christian identity. Being Christian isn't just a title, it isn't a description of something fixed, rather, it is an inclination, a direction, a movement towards something. A lot of people in our world use the name of Jesus and the title of Christianity as a flag to hide behind as if the name itself creates the identity. The people in today's story wanted a victorious messiah, so they could use him as a mascot to serve their goal of forming their nation into the image they desired. But Jesus was not what they thought he was and the only way any of them or any of us ever know him, is through the act of both listening to his voice and then actively following wherever he leads.

Jesus followed his father in this way. He was one with the Father, and yet he still spent an enormous amount of time in prayer, listening to, and then following his father's voice, even when it led to the cross. The way he purposed to listen and then chose to follow is an example for us. This imagery is everywhere in the Biblical texts. Today we hear John speaking of the way the white robed saints will be guided out of their great ordeal and into provision. David sings of God leading his people on the right path. Interestingly, the leadership of the shepherd does not seem to indicate avoidance of the valley of the shadow, or "the great ordeal". But through those difficult places, navigating the obstacles, the presence and provision of the shepherd is guaranteed.

For God to become our good shepherd, Jesus chose to become a lamb. Jesus flipped the image of the powerful to demonstrate what power is for. We still get that wrong so much of the time. It is why the vulnerable lamb is praised with the Almighty God on the throne. Because power is meant to be forfeited for the sake of elevating the weak. When we see Peter go in to raise Tabitha from the dead, he doesn't stand over her, he doesn't put on

royal vestments, he doesn't raise his fist in triumph. He kneels beside her and prays to the one who has the power, the one who chose to use that power through him. Our Scriptures continually illustrate the power of God's Kingdom demonstrated through the weakness the vessel wielding it. The inverted power of the lamb, the power to raise the dead to life, is the power structure we are invited into through Christ.

If you have ever found yourself in a situation that was beyond your ability, you know that it is scary. We live in a world of big problems and hurting people who are desperate for someone to help, someone to know what to do, someone to be with them. We can only imagine what Peter felt when he knelt next to this corpse. He had seen Jesus raise the dead, but we have no record of him doing it before Tabitha. And yet, he prayed. He looked to the one who had the power and the answers and apparently what he heard told him to speak to that dead body because he did...he did an impossible, insane thing. And what was impossible through the obedience of his faith, became possible.

Our shepherd, Jesus, follows God. We follow the shepherd. And as Jesus, the lamb becomes a shepherd for us, we Christ's lambs, become shepherds for others. The boldness of the shepherd fills the sheep with confidence to go where they are led, even to tables set before their enemies. Peter stood in the face of death and was not paralyzed by fear because he trusted his shepherd. The life of one who is led will be marked by acts that demonstrate power beyond their own limitations...power to bring life from death.

Today's scene from John's Revelation is one of triumph, but did you notice who was in this worshiping crowd? There are people from every nation, language, and tribe, a diversity of voices. And they had come out of a great ordeal. They were not the ones who had lived with safety and abundance. They had been vulnerable, and they had suffered. Yet they were the ones who were before the throne of God in praise for salvation. When the elder says they had washed themselves white in the blood of the lamb, he's highlighting this flipped imagery. It is suffering, it is through the blood of sacrificial death, that victory and

glory are won. Let's be honest, we want the blood on our victor's robes to be the blood of our enemies. But that is not the kingdom these people were celebrating. Our salvation was won through sacrifice. And our lives, following the example of the Lamb-turned-shepherd, will require an acceptance of that sacrifice and a willingness to follow the shepherd into death. Resurrection is only possible on the other side of death. If our lives are comfy, it can be easy to forget. But Christians are resurrection people. We are people of hope and victory...which means we are also people who must expect to walk through the valley of the shadow, if not for ourselves, then on behalf of others....so that we and those around us can experience resurrection on the other side.

Most of us enjoy and can appreciate the stained-glass windows of Jesus surrounded by sheep. We identify ourselves as the hapless, helpless, critters who are always getting ourselves into trouble and we're grateful for Jesus' protection and provision. However, as comfortable as that image is, we are also beckoned into lives imitating our shepherd by ourselves caring for God's sheep.... We are living in a moment of crisis for many. Our country is full of vulnerable, unprotected sheep. Regardless of what anyone believes is the government's responsibility, regardless of what anyone believes about the worthiness of certain individuals, those who follow Jesus are to love, protect, and care for the weak and vulnerable just as our good shepherd cares for us. The imprisoned, the orphans, immigrants and asylum seekers, the LBGTQ communities, people of low-income those who are food-insecure, the elderly and medically vulnerable populations, and the very earth itself are all crying out. And the voice of the shepherd is crying out for the hands and feet of Jesus to demonstrate the love and provision we have received to this hurting world.

May we be a people who honor our Good Shepherd by following the pattern of the Lamb, people who listen for and hear the voice of God. May we yield to our shepherd's guidance, using our power to elevate the weak and acting boldly in faith on behalf of the vulnerable.

