



## Attuned to the Shepherd's Voice

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John 10: 22-30 and Psalm 23  
Preached FCCW 4-17-2016

This week we've seen reports of deadly earthquakes in both Japan and Ecuador, along with the search and rescue missions that follow disasters like these.

But this week also marks the anniversary of another natural disaster.

Exactly six years and three days ago, a massive volcanic eruption in Iceland spewed ash into the atmosphere, creating the worst disruption to air travel over Europe since the Second World War.

South of the volcano, the ash blew down from the mountain, blotting out the sunlight and covering everything in a thick, gray paste.

Farmers across the region where the volcano erupted scrambled to protect their herds from inhaling or eating the ash, which could cause fluoride poisoning.

In the panic that ensued, some animals got lost in the fog of ash, and the farmers had to risk driving around in the polluted air searching for them.

For sheep farmers, the crisis was magnified because this was when the Spring lambs are born, and the lungs of such young animals are especially vulnerable to breathing the toxic ash. Sheep farmers had to race against time to seal their barns against the danger of airborne ash.

I haven't made the acquaintance of a lot of actual shepherds, but the pictures on the news of farmers exposing themselves to the dangers of the volcanic fallout in order to rescue their animals taught me some respect for the shepherd's work.

And it has given me a deeper appreciation for why the image of a shepherd caring for his flock as a metaphor for describing God's relationship to God's people runs so deep through the Bible.

Most of the time when the Bible talks about the God to human relationship in terms of shepherds and sheep, the point that is being made is the contrast between the vulnerability of the sheep and the dedication of the shepherd to protecting them.

Sometimes the threats to the flock are external and easily identifiable -- wild animals, for instance.

Other times, what the sheep need to be saved from is themselves -- their own tendency to get into dangerous places where they need rescuing.

Most of whatever you and I need rescuing from, also falls into one or the other of these categories.

Either they are problems that we didn't ask for, but that come our way anyways, or they are consequences of problems we created for ourselves.

Some of those who heard Jesus refer to himself as the Good Shepherd approached him directly and demanded that if he was the Messiah that he tell them in plain language instead of beating around the bush.

Jesus responded that he HAD told them; not in words, but in the things he did.

He says to them, "The works I do in my Father's name testify to me."

The healing, the forgiving, the caring for the lost sheep--these are the works that testify to Jesus as the Messiah.

To adapt a quote from the movie Forrest Gump --Messiah is as Messiah does.

The 23rd Psalm paints a comforting portrait of God as the Shepherd who guides, provides and protects.

But, that portrait is painted in such muted and serene hues that we can overlook how much doing is going on in that Psalm; how many action verbs are woven into the poetry of the Psalm.

The Lord, who is our shepherd MAKES us lie down in green pastures when we find ourselves running in a million directions at once.

He LEADS us beside still waters and in right paths, when life feels turbulent and confusing.

He RESTORES our souls.

He COMFORTS.

He PREPARES a table.

He ANOINTS.

His goodness and mercy FOLLOW us all the days of our lives.

In fact, the original Hebrew word used there is closer to meaning "pursue" than "follow".

God's goodness and mercy tirelessly PURSUES us, all the days of our lives. The same way those Icelandic shepherd's pursued their lost sheep.

The Good Shepherd is recognizable more through what he does for us,

than by what we know about him.

God's deeds speak plainly about God's life-affirming ways of relating to us.

Jesus told his opponents that if they could not hear what his deeds revealed about him, the problem was not with the language he was speaking, but in their inability to discern the evidence of their own eyes.

But, the ones who had experienced Jesus's forgiveness, healing and care --those to whom he was the Good Shepherd - they didn't need to ask him to prove whether or not he was the Messiah in words.

They knew who he was by the ways that he touched their lives.

They were attuned to the Shepherd's voice because of their relationship with him.

He was the Shepherd, and they were his flock.

And, Jesus said, nothing would ever come between him and his flock.

They would never be snatched from his hand.

No matter what the circumstances of their lives might be,

no matter what else the world might take from them,  
they could never be separated from the Shepherd who cared for them.

When you and I are attuned to the Shepherd's voice, we too learn to recognize Jesus' doings in so many areas of our lives.

We also become more aware of the voices of false shepherds who would try to snatch us from his hand.

The 23rd Psalm begins with the claim that with the Lord as our Shepherd, we shall not want.

Yet we are exposed daily to messages designed to inspire false wants within us; that try to convince us that we are missing out on something if we don't have the newest and best product, or service, or experience.

These messages breed a perpetual dissatisfaction that is never filled, but that keeps us chasing after material solutions to spiritual needs instead of following the voice of the Shepherd.

The Shepherd leads us to the serenity of green pastures and still waters in order to restore our souls.

But other voices send us off looking for greener pastures and uncharted waters that bring us only turmoil and insecurity.

The shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness,  
but other paths beckon us daily to abandon what is right in order to get what we want.

The Shepherd offers to comfort our fears in even the darkest valleys of life, while the world often instills fears within us, then uses those fears to manipulate us.

The Shepherd creates a safe place for us, where we are abundantly provided for;  
while most of the world marches to the drumbeat of scarcity that insists we never have enough.

You and I may not be physically threatened by volcanic ash raining down from the skies.

But we live and breathe in an atmosphere that can be spiritually toxic.

Whether or not we are attuned to the shepherd's voice makes all the difference in how we respond to the world around us.

Simon Tugwell wrote about what we hear when our hearts are attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd. He says:

"So long as we imagine that it is we who have to look for God, then we must often lose heart. But it is the other way about: he is looking for us. And so we can afford to recognize that very often we are not looking for God; far from it, we are in full flight from him, in high rebellion against him. And he knows that and has taken it into account. He has followed us into our own darkness; there where we thought finally to escape him, we run straight into his arms.

Our hope is in HIS determination to save us. And he will not give in!  
God's providence means that wherever we have got to, whatever we have done, that is precisely where the road to Heaven begins.

However many cues we have missed, however many wrong turnings we have taken, however unnecessarily we may have complicated our journey, the road still beckons, and the Lord still "waits to be gracious" to us."

Friends, in the Sacrament of Baptism, we celebrate our relationship to the Good Shepherd.

Our Baptism marks our commitment to attuning our hearts to the voice of the Good Shepherd, who has lain down his life for us, who speaks to us in the ways he guides, shelters and provides, and who will never let anything snatch us from the security of being held in his hands.