

SERMON: He Leads Them Out

TEXT: John 10:1-10

Years ago, before I ever went to seminary, I traveled to Ireland on a study trip. I was thrilled with the opportunity to see the world while also attending Trinity College in Dublin. I would spend six weeks in the country earning the final credits I needed to get my college degree – a mere ten years after I finished high school.

The first few days we had a chance to explore the city before classes began. While the other younger students on the trip spent their time pub-hopping or looking for Bono (the lead singer of the band U2), I was looking for St. Patrick's Cathedral so that I could hear the boys choir rehearse. I had a good map and most places in the city were within a reasonable walking distance, so I had no hesitation about heading out on my own. Plus, we had driven by the Cathedral on a bus tour so I had already seen it and knew what I was looking for.

But for some reason, I got lost. I spent an entire afternoon walking in circles trying to find this huge, famous landmark as though looking for a needle in a haystack. I consulted my map several times and yes, I'm pretty sure I even asked someone for directions. I thought about giving up. The time for the boys' choir

rehearsal was past, my feet were killing me, my self-confidence had crumbled, and I was near tears and longing for home.

But finally, I found it. I wandered in slowly and began exploring the artwork, the architecture, and the icons. It was quiet, not very many people around, but I was afraid to even clear my throat as even the slightest sound would echo through the space like an explosion. I sat there in the sanctuary for a while, just soaking in the history, the beauty, and the generations of faith in God that this place represented. My homesickness and anxiety was soon overcome by a feeling of peace and gratitude for God's house in which I felt more at home than anywhere else.

I think many of us who are longtime churchgoers know that feeling of safety and peace and rest in a church sanctuary. We treasure this place where we find family and comfort and protection. We are like sheep who enjoy the security of the sheepfold, where we know our Shepherd is present, guarding us and watching over us as his own. We know this metaphor well, especially from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul."

We also find it in John's gospel, where Jesus seems to play several roles in care of the sheep: the shepherd, the gatekeeper, and the Gate itself. As the shepherd, Jesus is the one who calls his own sheep by name, and they follow him because they know his voice. As the gatekeeper, he opens the gate for the shepherd and he keeps thieves and bandits out. And as the Gate, he gives the sheep entrance into abundant life. We've lived by this metaphor for so long that we are totally comfortable with it.

We can see ourselves, too, in the description of the early church that we read from the Book of Acts. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.... All who believed were together." Again, this feels pretty comfortable to us. We like being together with each other. Our church is like a family to us. We enjoy worship and fellowship; we appreciate learning from each other and praying for each other.

So, it's all good, right? We're all together, loved by Jesus and sharing the love with each other. But there's something else about the shepherd that I think we've missed. Or maybe sometimes we forget. HE LEADS THEM OUT. "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." You see, the sheep don't stay

within the security of gates and fences all their lives. They have to leave the sheepfold to find pasture.

Here's what another pastor wrote about this. "Seems Jesus knew something about sheep. They are fearful, not keen on change, in need of protection and a leader. They must be called repeatedly, assured it is safe to move. Thankfully, that is exactly what Jesus provides. The beauty and abundance of the pasture is available to us and to whoever hears Jesus' voice, but we must be willing to trust the leader and follow if we are ever to experience it. The temptation for us in the church is to make Jesus a wall instead of a gate, a barrier instead of a place that offers access, a stern guard instead of the Good Shepherd. We do that when we act out of fear rather than trusting the One who knows us, calls us by name and leads us out." (Jill Duffield, Looking into the Lectionary, The Presbyterian Outlook, May 1, 2017)

It's great to have a sanctuary, a safe place to go to be reassured of God's promises and to recall the stories of God's faithfulness. It's important to have a place to rest, to have our faith renewed, and to be revitalized for service out in the world. We have to be careful, though, not to get too comfortable. It's tempting to settle in, to get cozy in those green pastures and just enjoy. This is where the metaphor breaks down - sheep don't have to work. When Jesus leads them out, it's

just for more pasture to feed on and to lie down in. But we are called to work.

And need to get back out there.

The world can be a scary place, that's for sure. The challenges before us can be overwhelming. How do we engage society and stand up for what we believe in when rage and hate seem to run rampant? Even among Christians there seems to be little agreement about what's really important and what our message should be.

So we need to follow – and emulate – the Good Shepherd as HE LEADS US OUT. And we need to listen for his voice. And we need to know him so that we will recognize his voice.

Consider the church like a school, a learning institution, a training center. We go to church to learn about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, to learn that we are created by God and we belong to God, to learn about the sacrifice of Jesus and the things he said and did, to experience the comfort and the inspiration and the power of the Holy Spirit. We meet as the church to learn how to pray, to practice loving one another, to discuss how to practice our faith in the world. Then, we are sent out to BE the church, to share what we've learned, to do the work we've been

trained to do. But we do not go alone. The teacher, the trainer, the expert goes with us. JESUS LEADS US OUT.

We don't graduate. Let me say that again: We *never* graduate from going to church. We keep coming back because we need to keep learning and growing. We need to have our memories refreshed and our confidence restored and our spirits renewed for the most important work of our lives, for the living of our faith, for the role of Christian from which we also *never retire*.

Once when I was on a mission trip there was a church group who all wore the same t-shirt one day. On the front of the shirt was the name of their church, and on the back it said: "Don't just go to church, BE the church." That is the challenge before us: to be the church out in the world, to follow Christ and to represent Christ and to show others that "sanctuary" and rest and renewal can be found in him.

HE LEADS US OUT. Let us follow, to the glory of God!

AMEN.