

Suffering For Good

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St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 23, Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

The imagery of the shepherd and sheep is one of the strongest metaphors in the Scriptures. Today's shepherds in countries like New Zealand bear only passing resemblance to the shepherds of Biblical times or of those in more undeveloped parts of the world today. In New Zealand we envisage shepherds at work with their dogs, horses or motorbikes, or even drones these days, working their sheep in carefully managed fields or over well managed wide mountain vistas. The sheep are driven before them, around them or wherever the shepherd wants them to go. Contrast this with the Biblical shepherd. When I'm in Tanzania I love watching the shepherds with their flocks, which are predominantly of goats. They are almost identical to the young shepherds I saw in Israel with their sheep and goats. In both countries the setup is all but identical and has remained unchanged for centuries. Young boys, sometimes only knee high, walk along with a slender stick that helps them with all sorts of things. In the morning as they go out the boy leads out. If a few flocks are together the shepherd calls the animals and they separate themselves from the gathered flock and come to his call. The shepherd and animals then move out together, sometimes walking many miles, to seek the food for the day. In dry and dusty environs this may be a small patchy grass or shrub area hidden among the hills or in a small crevasse somewhere. Sometimes it might be a wider valley where other shepherds are also feeding their flocks. The animals follow in ragtag but not disorderly fashion, cropping any stray bit of food that grows along the wayside, particularly almost any flowering plant. Through the day they feed and rest while the shepherd sits or wanders carefully over them watching. Sometimes they play music on small carved pipes or instruments they carry about them in their robes. At the end of the day they all return to the thorn enclosed encampment where they stay for much of the year. The animals know where they are going and they surge ahead, but not too far, not past the lead animal and never too far from their shepherd. If wild animals attack they know they will be protected. When they get to their enclosure the thick walls of thorns guard them at night. The round enclosure is complete except for the entrance which is open for the flocks to move in and out. Sometimes a thorn barrier is pulled across. At night the shepherd sleeps across the doorway. There is no way in or out except past the shepherd. The shepherd guards the flock with his life.

Today's reading from John's gospel continues from the narrative of Jesus healing the man born blind. The healing had taken place in the Temple courts and subsequently the blind man had been thrown out after He was healed by the Pharisees who were incensed at what Jesus had done. This irrespective of the fact that the miracle was one of the three that hailed the Messiah. Jesus had found the restored man, told him who He was then turned to the crowd to comment. He did so through the metaphor of the shepherd.

Turning to the crowd Jesus said, **"For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."** Not stupid, when it came to their own position, some of Pharisees who were present challenged Jesus asking, **"What? Are we blind too?"** Jesus response cannot have made them happy. **"If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."** Then more specifically, **"Truly, truly I tell you Pharisees"**. There could be no doubt who Jesus was about to speak to or about. This is not a politically correct way to do things. Here they are in a very public place and Jesus is about to draw attention to the Pharisees failings. They have formally condemned Jesus and anyone who was associated with Him, even to

the extent of having them thrown out of the synagogue (John 9:22). Their lot cast Jesus would now begin to bring judgement upon the Pharisees and expose them.

It is a common fallacy to think that we have all of life to work things out with God and can therefore leave it as long as we like. It's a foolish notion. We have no idea how long we will live or how and when we will die. Just look at all the accidents in the newspaper, all the medical surprises people have. "Things always happen to others but not me" is the thinking of a fool. Through the Scriptures we have examples of people who have made up their minds, whose hearts have turned to stone in opposition to God and they self-determine their own negative fate. God does not force them back from this position but honours their freewill, even if it is leading them to hell. Judas and Pharaoh in Egypt are classic examples. Some of the Pharisees predetermined their eternal fate when they steadfastly refused to listen to Jesus. Upon them Jesus will cast judgement and that judgement will be irreversible, they have committed the ultimate sin.

Given the common knowledge in His day of shepherds and how they operated Jesus parable of the shepherd, the flock and the thief is poignant. There is but one flock that belongs to the great shepherd. All the younger shepherds learn from Him as they guard the flock which has been entrusted to them. The shepherd becomes the gatekeeper, ensuring safety and that the essential needs of the flock are met. Sleeping in the gate at night, the most dangerous time, and defending the flock in the open from the lions and various meat-eaters that prowled the land in that time was no easy task. We remember that David had little fear before Goliath likely due to, not only faith, but his experience protecting his flock from wild animals. His slung stones weren't accidentally accurate, they were the result of years of practice. The shepherd could only do his task properly if on occasion he stood up to the task of risking life and limb. In contrast the thief, Jesus says, does not enter through the gate. He takes the comparatively easy way without doing the hard yards, without the sacrifice, without the risk. He has nothing but his own desire, wants and needs at heart and comes with no good purpose.

We know this well today. How many people want to shortcut learning and education and make their fortune or whatever without work? In the building industry we have been beset with charlatans and crooks who have tried to make a quick buck at the home-builders expense. Eventually it becomes very costly and we have seen no end of good people ripped off. I'm sure that in the current environment it is no better right now and people building have to be very careful. How many have tried to fake or buy online academic qualifications they haven't earned? And then get good jobs they aren't prepared for? Way too many at even the highest levels and we cringe as we see them exposed. The thief tries to take shortcuts. Even in the field of faith we see the same. Leadership that sets itself up without an association with others or oversight, with knowledge that they believe is greater than any other. Such are set to fail and regularly do. The thief comes to steal, to destroy, to get what they can but when trouble comes they will desert the flock as quick as a wink. Only true shepherds will suffer for and with the flock.

The wise do not listen to the thief, the charlatan, the trickster, they go with the tried and true, the faithful over time. They know the voice of honesty and integrity. So says Jesus, the sheep know the voice of their shepherd and disdain the rest. "I am the Door" claims Jesus, "The Way, the Truth, the Life" any else who claim to be so are liars and worse. In Hebrew thought the Messiah would be the Door to eternity so the imagery is doubly powerful. Jesus is the one who opens the gate to heaven for us and calls us in.

In 1 Peter 2:19-21 we are given an interesting and challenging reflection: “**For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**” At first the comment is self-evident. If someone suffers because they have done wrong then that’s on them and so it should be. What value, what credit if our suffering is self-inflicted because we have been foolish? None. But it is commendable, it is of credit, if we suffer for doing good and particularly as this verse points out, if we do good because we are **conscious of God**. That is, we are very aware that our lives are lived in His sight, that God is always with us. Furthermore, when we do good and suffer we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. But why is suffering for good necessary?

Several reasons. Firstly, **we live in a fallen and corrupt world**. Necessarily the things of God, good and pure as they are, will be in conflict with this fallen-ness and are forced to tolerate it for the time God has allowed for human free will, just as God does. Life is tough. We need to generate what we eat, either directly or through the economic process. Things are not all handed on a plate to us – at least not for most of us.

Secondly, there is **an active agent against God’s will in the world**, that is Lucifer and his cohort. When we align ourselves with Jesus, with God, we become targets of this enemy. Again, only for the time God has set aside and allowed this to happen. The devil has no need to attack the non-Christian, they are already on the road to destruction but the Christian becomes a deliberate target and this produces some of our suffering.

Thirdly, **when we take a stand for God against evil we will likely suffer for our faith**. We do this of our own free will and decision and live out the consequences freely as evidence of our faith. Not for the reward of salvation but having received and continuing to receive salvation in Christ our heart is to serve Him in witness and in our lives.

Fourthly, **in suffering we grow**. Our Christ-like character develops. I know we hate to be told that but it’s true. Everyone knows how physical exercise can be painful. But that pain is the death of weak muscle cells and the growth of newer stronger tissue. So too our pain for good should be evidence of our spiritual growth. The old saying that “*what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger*” is only true if it has a positive context. When we learn from mistakes or opposition, when we understand reason and purpose and can grow from it, then it can be true. If we become more Christ-like through what we go through then isn’t it worth it?

Perversely, while it might seem that it makes sense to some not go God’s way to make life easy, in fact to not do so makes it even worse.

The example of the early church in Acts 2 is an example of both good and not so good. The early church took their mission to heart and worked to live it out. They were willing to give everything to follow Jesus and did. However, in their enthusiasm they didn’t listen carefully to what Jesus had told them about the mission to the world that they would be embarked upon. This resulted in twofold suffering: the natural suffering that comes from doing God’s work and facing opposition and the suffering that came from their bad stewardship. Yes they saw positive short-term gains but in giving everything away they beggared the church in Jerusalem. This became a burden for the wider church and limited its ability to function. Staying together and not going into the world as instructed resulted in persecution coming

upon the church in order to send them out to do their work. This requires some reflection that you may want to ponder in your quiet time.

Jesus suffered because evil is at work in the world. He suffered so that we could be saved. We suffer because there is evil in the world and because of our own folly. But if we do not give up, if we persevere and sacrifice for others, we join with Jesus the Great Shepherd in both His suffering and His ultimate joy. Your choice.

Amen.