**STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN**

Phil Van Auken

Seems like every time you open the Bible, you hear sheep. Right away in Genesis, we find Caine tilling and his brother, Able, herding sheep. Later on in Genesis, Jacob’s fashionable spotted sheep raise a commotion. Then the prophet Isaiah mentions sheep going astray and standing silent before their shearer. Jeremiah speaks of sheep driven away by lions and refers to the house of Israel as the lost sheep. And in the New Testament, Jesus sends out his disciples as sheep in the midst of wolves. Jesus even mentions his sheep from another fold. I wonder if he got overtime pay for that?

With all those sheep around, there are plenty of shepherds in the Bible too. Able was a shepherd and so was David. Today’s reading of the beloved 23rd psalm refers to the Lord as our shepherd, and in the reading from John’s gospel, Jesus calls himself the good shepherd.

But, why so much attention to a bunch of wooly sheep? Maybe it’s because when the Bible speaks of sheep, it’s really referring to us--as in you and me! Baaa! People are the real sheep of the Bible. And boy do we human sheep need a shepherd!

Wooly sheep need green pastures to survive, but clothed sheep gotta have green money. Sheep in the fields must be led to pasture and protected from predators and storms, as well as escorted through the rain and rough terrain. But comfortable people like us seem to need--or at least want-- way more than sheep do. Like credit cards and fancy yards, cool cars and cheap gas, and whatever else catches our eye.

Being so vulnerable, wooly sheep are next to helpless, especially around wolves. But clothed sheep are even more exposed when you consider worrisome things like house payments, medical care, and old age—YIKES!

Speaking of wolves, sheep can’t outrun them, out-fight them, or out-bite them. But we people have much scarier things to worry about than the big bad wolf, like winning football games in the Big Bad 12 Conference. Sheep get panicky and flighty at the slightest thing, just like us when it comes to medical check-ups and cholesterol counts. Sheep run scared from thunder and barking dogs. People run from responsibilities like helping their neighbors.

And boy, sheep sure are dumb! They just stand there and make no fuss while their wool is chopped and cropped into money for enterprising capitalists. Ah, but people are just as easy to fleece. We stand there paying exorbitant credit card interest rates; wringing our hands over ne’er-do-well public officials, while dithering about taxes and watching more and more of our fellow Americans try to survive on welfare and minimum wage jobs.

No doubt about it, it’s easy to see why simple-minded wooly sheep need a shepherd, but what about us complicated, ornery Homo Sapiens? At least sheep in the field are smart enough to know who their shepherd is and willingly follow him into the unknown. People, though, aren’t always docile, cooperative creatures.

The New Testament is full of personalities whose rambunctious lives required some serious shepherding. Jesus shepherded Pharisee Saul away from the Christians he was persecuting and sent him blind into the city of Damascus where Apostle Paul turned from a ravenous religious wolf into a humble sheep.

The same good shepherd led Peter to forgive people seventy times seven and to back away from violence, like the time he tried to sword fight soldiers who came to arrest the Pascal lamb/sheep, Jesus himself. Hard-headed disciple Thomas was led off his path of doubt onto the path of proclaiming Jesus’ true divinity. Martha was led to more important things than fussing about household chores. John the Baptist imprisoned was led back to renewed faith in Jesus as the prophesied Son of God.

Jesus led Zacchaeus away from corrupt tax collectors and the common people away from the Sadducee and Pharisee wolves. A blind man was led down the path of sun light for his eyes and spiritual light for his soul.

The Samaritan woman at the well was led off the path of sin onto the path of community evangelism. While he was dying on the cross, Jesus used his rod and staff to comfort one of the two criminals crucified with him and led him into paradise. Along the road to Emmaus, God’s Shepherd led Cleopas until he finally recognized he had been journeying with the resurrected Jesus.

So if Jesus successfully herded all these famous and infamous people of the Bible, I guess I should be more than ready to follow his rod and staff myself. But my timid sheep instincts are telling me to ask the Good Shepherd a few basic questions first—you know, just to keep me from panicking about giving up control over my life. So, here I go with the first question:

**Good shepherd, why did you choose ME to join your flock?** **The good shepherd heard me:**

**I have chosen you, and appointed you to produce good fruit from your life, fruit that will last. I have come, not to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many, including you.**

**But shepherd, as one of your sheep, where will my PLACE be in the flock? He replied:**

**The sheep God will set on my right hand, and the goats on my left.**

**Where do I go to begin my journey with you, Good Sheperd**?

**Enter through the narrow gate; for wide is the path, and broad is the way that leads to destruction.**

**Good shepherd, how can I be a goof follower in your flock?**

**You cannot allow two masters to rule your life. Unless you are willing to make a total commitment, you cannot truly follow me.**

**But where are you sending us?**

**I am sending you out as sheep among wolves.**

**Who will we meet along our journey with you?**

The Son of Man is sent into the world to save those that are lost.

**Good shepherd, what else can we expect to see on our journey with you?**

**If you believe, you will see the glory of God.**

**What should we do if we need something during the journey**?

**Ask, and you will receive, and your joy will be full.**

**Will you ever leave the flock during the journey?**

**I will go to prepare a place for you. Whoever believes in me will not perish, but be redeemed and have everlasting life.**

**How will the flock be comforted while you’re away?**

**I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another comforter to be with you forever.**

**What shall we do while we wait for you to return?**

**If you love me, then keep my commandments. Learn to practice forgiveness, and your life will be filled with mercy and grace.**

**Well, I gotta admit, based on these comforting answers, it’s obvious that I’ll be better off following the shepherd than journeying through life all on my own. But I still have a few more questions to ask. I’d like to hear form some human sheep who have already completed their life’s journey with the Good Shepherd. I wonder how their journey went. Hmmm, here’s an angelic-looking sheep right here to ask:**

**Say, tell me brother sheep, did you lack anything on your lifelong journey with the good shepherd?**

**The Lord was my shepherd; I did not want.**

**Where did the shepherd take you?**

**To green pastures and still waters**

**How did you find these pastures?**

**The Shepherd knew all the right paths.**

**Was the journey to these pastures exhausting?**

**No, they restored my soul.**

**Where else did you go on your journey?**

**Through a dark valley where I encountered some of my enemies.**

**Weren’t you awfully afraid?**

**I feared no evil.**

**But how can that be, since you were alone in a dark place? Because my shepherd was with me; his rod and staff comforted me. He prepared a table for me and my cup overflowed. He anointed my head with oil.**

**How did you feel at the end of your journey with the good shepherd?**

**I was glad and fulfilled, for goodness and mercy followed me all the days of my life.**

**Now that your journey in life is over, what are you doing?**

**Dwelling in the house of the Lord where I will be forever.**

**Bingo—that’s just where I want to end up too! Now I’m definitely convinced to put my life in the hands of this amazing shepherd. Maybe you are too. But how do we find him and his flock?**

**To find the Good Shepherd, we first have to STOP trying to guide everything in our own lives. Only the good shepherd knows the paths that lead to green grass and still waters. We must then LOOK for his rod and staff which guide us by the answers we receive to our prayers. Remember, the Good Shepherd knows our voices one by one. Prayer keeps us close to him, so he can lead us around and through the ever-twisting paths of life.**

**And after you have stopped and looked, open your ears to LISTEN for our shepherd’s familiar voice, which all of his true sheep recognize. Only God’s true shepherd can say:** “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” **Only God’s true shepherd laid down his life for us sheep.** **And as his sheep, all we have to do is faithfully follow him to abundant life.**

**That’s why I’m more than happy to be a lost sheep following the Good Shepherd! How about you--let’s make his life our life.** Let’s follow him to life everlasting. **And all of God’s children say…not Amen, but Baa-men!**