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The Shepherd and the Sheep

(First in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. –Psalm 23:1- (Supporting Text—
Psalm 23)

One might think that human beings would not glory to be called sheep. Perhaps we never thought much about it, but if we did, we might conclude that we really don't have particular respect for sheep. As animals go, sheep might not especially inspire us. We may wish to soar like an eagle or run through the wind blown plain as a wild mare or stallion, or perhaps some of us have considered at times that it would be delightful to flit delicately among the flowers as a butterfly, but who among us has ever thought that it would be nice to bleat compliantly among the herd of a thousand sheep? Sheep might not broadly stir our imaginations. They are routine, simple creatures.

The metaphor of God as our Shepherd and we as God's sheep was common in ancient Israelite tradition as evidence throughout the Old Testament with perhaps the best known verses in the twenty third Psalm. It begins with our first of ten memory verses for this winter season, *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.* Psalm 23.

Jesus picked up on the metaphor in his own ministry. There is beautiful expression of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and we Christians his sheep in the tenth chapter of John's gospel. Jesus creates a beautiful image of himself as the Good Shepherd and his people as his sheep whom he knows by name and who trust him with their lives and safety. Apparently, he was not offended by the idea of people being compared to sheep in some ways.

So, how might we be like sheep? I would like to suggest three ways. Perhaps you can think of other possibilities or you may not think my comparisons are the important ones, or even accurate. For sure we could probably think of some that are humorous. These three seem interesting to me.

First, it seems to me that, like sheep, people are vulnerable to getting hurt. Second, as sheep need to be with other sheep, so people need to be with other people. Third, like sheep, people don't always know where they are going.

In the sequel to M. Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*, which he calls, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, Peck continues his reflections upon the synthesis of religion and psychology.¹ He emphasizes not only the inevitability of human suffering, particularly spiritual and emotional suffering, but then goes one further. He says that painful experiences are really the growing edges of life, that we need them, that they are great gifts to us, and that without them we might stay much the same. The problem becomes that as we recognize our own vulnerability in life, we try, what might be naturally enough, to protect ourselves from pain, to shield ourselves from it whenever we can. This might take form in two ways.

We might not take risks in the first place, or, when we do have pain, we may deny it to ourselves, or minimize it, not staying with it long enough to see where it leads us, thus never really resolving it. Consequently, we can get rather stuck in life, not learning new things or developing new skills. For Peck, this is the antithesis of life: not growing, not maturing, not moving forward. We might call it anti-life. Peck says it is only our pain which can sometimes jolt us into new perceptions of things, into a richer, fuller experience of life. In this sense, human vulnerability is not something of which to be resentful or ashamed. We might even say that our vulnerability to pain leads us to our salvation.

Here is a direct quote from the book:

*Courage is the capacity to go ahead in spite of the fear, in spite of the pain. When you do that, you will find that overcoming that fear will not only make you stronger but will be a big step forward toward maturity.*²

But how do we do that? How do we get more courage? This may be where the Shepherd Lord is especially needed. To know that we vulnerable sheep have a Good Shepherd watching over us might help us to feel secure even while we meet our griefs and anxieties and pain head on. If we fall into a deep pit a loving hand will lift us out of it, or as Corrie Ten Boon said, "*There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.*"³

Another part of the Christian good news is that we do not need to be sheep apart from other sheep. To imagine a sheep wandering around a hillside or meadow all alone is a sad and even tragic picture. Like sheep, people need each other. If we are vulnerable sheep, we are vulnerable sheep together. We can lean on each other, care for each other, hold each other's hands as we grow and mature together. Sometimes we can even share each other's pain. We can take a lesson from the Good Shepherd who knows each of the sheep by name. To know someone's name in the ancient Jewish sense was more than to know what to call someone. It was more than to know what sound to make with the vocal cords in order to get someone's attention. To know a person's name was to be aware of the personality, the spirit, the joys and struggles which define a person's life and build a person's character.

Third, like sheep, people don't always know where they are going. If you are like me, life can seem sometimes like a hopelessly complex maze. The way ahead may seem clear and then suddenly it's as if a fog settles and it's hard even to see the lines in the road. Like sheep, we might not always know where the next green pasture lays, or we think we know where it lays only to find ourselves still looking for it when we get there. Don't we need to know that when we are not sure of the way we should go, someone else is? And maybe it's not so much that there are only so many green pastures, and they are hard to find, hidden between large stretches of barren land. Maybe the thing to learn is that because the Good Shepherd Lord is leading us there is green grass almost wherever we are, that somehow life is rich, the earth a generous mother, the human soul a cache of spiritual resources, that opportunities for faith and love abound, simply because we are alive. Maybe the important thing is not so much that we will be led from one green pasture to another, but that we were led into everlasting green pastures of one form or another when the Shepherd Lord breathed into us the breath of life itself.

It may be that for any analogy to last three thousand years there must be truth in it. A classic idea like God as the Shepherd and people as the sheep would probably not be an exception. We may not care to accept our sheep-likeness sometimes and yet I wonder if there is not some real dignity in it. Within our vulnerability lies our capacity to love. Our need for each other leads to the creation of community. And our being lost leads us to faith in the Wisdom beyond our own. And always, always, always, there is the Good Shepherd; and *goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forever. (Psalms 23:6b, adapted)*

1. The idea of painful experiences being necessary for spiritual growth is based upon the discussion in M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) Chapter 1, *Consciousness and the Problem of Pain*, 17-31.
2. Ibid. 23.
3. Corrie Ten Boon, *The Hiding Place* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971) 217.

Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.