

SAFE WITH THE SHEPHERD

A little boy is afraid to go to school because he thinks his parents might move away while he is gone. He doesn't want to go to bed at night because he fears that his parents might die while he sleeps. Coping with fear is a terrific battle for a child. It's like being on 24-hour guard duty.

Sometimes it feels like fear is lurking around every corner or hovering over our heads. It attacks us at different levels. Some fears are relatively minor. What is going to happen tomorrow? Will it rain on my picnic? Will I get sick? Other fears reach down into the very core of our being and twist our stomachs into knots. Do people like me? Will I make it through this crisis? What if things don't turn out the way I want? What is going to become of me?

With all the pressures we feel and all the possibilities for evil, is it any wonder that we live with increasing insecurity? If we are not worrying about ourselves, we are concerned for our families, or our friends, or about pollution, or global war. There always seems to be something. It is like being on 24-hour guard duty and it doesn't make any difference how old you are. The words in John were written to Christians who were also on "guard duty," suffering hardships and persecution. Not only did they have to deal with the customary distresses of life, but they faced questions such as, "Would they be arrested? And if so, how would they die?" would they be whipped, forced to fight the gladiators, or fed to the lions? Theirs were frightful issues of life and death. Let's look at how John reached out to minister to the temptations and insecurities of the people of his day by telling a story about Jesus.

He relates the Lord's parable of the Good Shepherd. John says, "Jesus is the Good Shepherd." He is the trustworthy one who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep-like people. Trust Jesus for he will shepherd you safely through life. And how do you know you are on the right path? You follow the word of Jesus into the green pastures, for he says, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." The call of our Lord, however, is hidden in a whole chorus of worldly voices which beckon us. Other would-be shepherds seek to tempt us away from the Good Shepherd, the joy of his forgiveness and the security of his love. And when we are weak and confused we may fall victim to the enticements of other gods.

I am reminded of an American tourist who was traveling in the Middle East. He came upon several shepherds whose flocks had intermingled while drinking water from a brook. After an exchange of greetings, one of the shepherds turned toward the sheep and called out follow me. Immediately his sheep separated themselves from the rest and followed him. Then one of the

remaining shepherds called out, follow me. And his sheep left the common flock to follow him. The traveler then said to the third shepherd, "I would like to try that. Let me put on your cloak and hat and see if I can get the rest of the sheep to follow me." The shepherd smiled knowingly as the traveler wrapped himself in the cloak, put the hat on his head and called out, follow me. The sheep never moved. Not one of them moved toward him. "Will the sheep ever follow someone other than you?" the traveler asked. The shepherd replied, "Oh yes, sometimes a sheep gets sick, and then it will follow anyone."

We have seen, haven't we? People young and old, who are sick. Battered by the storms of life and distracted by voices urging them to go this way and that, they have lost their bearings and they don't know where they are or where they are going. That can be more than a little frightening; it leads to despair, and to hopelessness. And when someone is sick they will follow anyone who will promise a moment of happiness, a brief feeling of peace or forgetfulness, or a sense that they are somebody. The call of Jesus the Good Shepherd is, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." There is no better way, no greater truth, and no happier life. Our lord reaches out to us in love that we might follow him.

Sometimes in fear or desperation we chose to follow no one and instead turn inward and try to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps, as if that were possible. But the Way, the Truth and the Life cannot be discovered within one's self. That's why you can read all the self-help books in the world and still be lost, confused, and frightened. No self-oriented accomplishments will give enduring fulfillment, security of purpose, or abiding peace, no matter what the world says.

The trouble for many people is that they have abandoned the church, or at least relegated it to a bit role in their lives; it is a convenience at best. Thus the power of forgiveness, the gifts of grace, the warmth of fellowship are absent. When people no longer worship they lose sight of the beacons which warn us of the life-shattering rocks, they often forfeit the word of God which lights the path. They find themselves in need of a Shepherd but they don't know where to look.

That is the future for those who follow some superficial shepherd down a primrose path littered with promises of pleasure and satisfaction. Ultimately he deserts us, leaving us lost, bewildered, twisting and turning and aching.

So we hold before each other the option of following the Good Shepherd, to declare with our lips and our lives he is indeed the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is the Good Shepherd who beckons to us in our heartbreak and our loneliness, calls out to us in our guilt and in our dying. When we come to him he brings his love to our lovelessness and his power to our powerlessness so that there is

healing; now there is forgiveness, now there is direction to living, and life undying. That is the promise, "I give you life eternal and nothing in all creation will ever be able to snatch you out of my hand."

It is true that coping with our fears is a terrific battle; sometimes it seems overwhelming. We need all the help we can get. We need a Shepherd who will stand sentinel over our lives so that we can rest, knowing his mighty power will sustain us. No other god will do; we need the Good Shepherd who will lead us in the right Way, teach us the liberating Truth and give us strength for Life and peace and security at this life's end.

One of my favorite stories illustrates this for us in a poignant way. There was a little boy named Jimmy, who was the youngest of three children born into a wealthy Canadian family. He had been sickly since he was an infant, but in his fifth year his illness grew worse and he could no longer walk. His parents spared no expense in seeing that Jimmy received the best medical care available. They purchased an electric wheelchair so that he could get around by himself, and any toy he wanted was his for the asking. As the months progressed it became obvious that Jimmy could not hang on much longer. The parents were anxious, wondering if they should say anything to him about his illness or if they should tell him he was dying. Although they belonged to no church, the father knew a man whom he respected and who was a Christian. He went to the man to ask his advice.

The man shared many things about life and death and about God's greatest gift of grace in Jesus. Then he said, "I like to teach young children this short Bible verse. Perhaps you could teach it to Jimmy. There's one word for each finger on the left hand: 'The Lord is my shepherd.' It's easy for them to learn, and afterward I explain the love of God in that verse. I always tell them to hold on to the fourth finger, because that means I belong to Jesus."

The father went home and taught Jimmy the Bible verse, doing his best to explain its meaning, and telling him to grasp the fourth finger on his left hand. Jimmy was delighted and repeated it many times a day. One morning Jimmy's mother rushed in to get his father. "Jimmy's gone," she said, sobbing. "He's gone. But look. Look."

The father ran to his son's room and looked in. there was Jimmy, silent in death, but his hands were in front of his face, and his right hand was clasped tightly around the fourth finger of his left hand. That father taught his son many things and gave him many possessions, but nothing he did for Jimmy was as valuable as introducing him to the Good Shepherd. The important thing for Jimmy was not that he had all the facts straight on Jesus, but that he was aware that Jesus, the Son of God, knew about him, and loved him. When you are weak and vulnerable it is good to know that someone

so powerful comes to you personally, so that you might have the security and joy of knowing that, come what may, you will be cared for and provided for because you belong to Jesus.

Today I invite you to listen to the call of the Good Shepherd, to accept his invitation to let him be your God. He comes declaring his love and promising to be your God forever. He offers eternal power through the Holy Spirit, and safe passage through the uncertainties of life. That is the good news I have for you today. You belong to Jesus. Follow him, for he is the Way of salvation. He is the Truth that endures forever. He is the Life that does not end. Jesus will give you the security of knowing where you are going, what you believe, and what you will be at last. Jesus loves you and you are safe with the Shepherd. Amen.