

January 29, 2012
The National Presbyterian Church

Inspiring Leadership

John 10:1-18; Ezekiel 34:7-24

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In our sermons through Easter we are continuing a series in which we're looking together at the ministry of Jesus through the eyes Saint John, one of four gospel writers in the pages of the New Testament telling his version of the story of Jesus. There are so many stories, says John (21:25) that could be included in a compendium of what Jesus did that all the books in the world could not hold them! But I am choosing these ones he says at the end of the gospel that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God and you may find life in His name (20:31). So we're looking at the account of Jesus through the eyes of St. John and we pick up the story today in the 10th Chapter and the story that we read as our first scripture reading. Now the 10th Chapter is closely related to the 9th Chapter and I need to begin by taking you back to the 9th Chapter to pick up the story and to weave the themes together.

In Chapter 9, last week, what we read was the story of Jesus healing a blind man: a man who had been blind from birth. The story is about Jesus' power to heal and to give sight; to give not only physical sight to this man, but also spiritual sight. Re-read the long chapter, John Chapter 9, and you'll see not only a man whose eyes now can see as they had never seen, but whose mind can see God-made-known-in-Jesus-Christ as he has never seen or perceived him before, and whose life is strengthened and renewed by that knowledge. It's a story both about Jesus' power and human blindness – including our blindness: your blindness and my blindness, and the blindness of the spiritual leaders of Jesus' day.

Your blindness and my blindness because we do not by nature see life as we ought to see it. Our lives, our past, our present or our future. We need God to enter our lives to give us new sight, to see as God sees. And the good news is of the gospel is that God wants to do this for us through Jesus Christ. We are blind and we need his help, and the story focuses our attention on that, but not only on that.

The story focuses also on the *blindness of the religious leaders* in Jesus' own day – the particular historical context in which Jesus found himself. In this story even though a man is healed who was blind from birth there is no joy in the religious leaders observing the event. There is no surprise. There is no awe. There is no wonder. It's an amazing story. Something miraculous happens in front of them and all they want to do is get rid of the man who performs the miracle. They are absolutely blind and in their blindness to the presence of God in their midst *they disqualify themselves as leaders of the people in the sight of God*. Because of this blindness to the presence of God in their midst they disqualify themselves as leaders in the sight of God, and Jesus publicly indicts them, calling them "blind guides"!

And this leads us into our chapter, the 10th Chapter of John's gospel where this indictment continues in no uncertain terms. Jesus continues to call them names! He calls them 'blind' in Chapter 9. In John Chapter 10 Jesus speaks about the leaders of the people as 'thieves,' as 'strangers,' as 'destroyers,' as 'hired hands' who don't care a whit for God's people.

And he does this in a way which would be unmistakably clear to those who were listening: Jesus places himself in the position of the great prophets of Israel, like Isaiah and Amos and Micah, who, like Jesus launched sharp attack on their leadership. And to make this link with the ancient prophets explicit, Jesus he actually quotes from our Old Testament, from the book of the prophet Ezekiel.

I would guess that most of us hearing John's account of Jesus as 'the Good Shepherd' would say "Isn't this a wonderful, beautiful, gentle image!" But what everybody in Jesus' day would have heard as soon as Jesus spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd would not have evoked such warm feelings at all! You see they would have know that Jesus was referring to words spoken by the prophet Ezekiel when he launched an attack against the faithless leadership of the people, 600 years before Jesus' birth! "You are faithless shepherds," says Ezekiel. No shepherds at all. Fat cats pushing the other sheep out of my fold! Listen to some other verses of Ezekiel that I'd like to share with you from our Chapter, 34:

Therefore you shepherds hear the word of the Lord says Ezekiel. Because my sheep have become a prey the God is speaking through Ezekiel because my sheep have become a prey and my sheep have become food for the wild animals since there was no shepherd and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep but the shepherds have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep, therefore you shepherds hear the word of the Lord.

*Thus says the Lord God, I am against the **shepherds**. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths. [And in Verse 19] Must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet and drink what you have fouled with your feet? [To which the answer is 'no,' says God.] I will put an end to your faithless leadership.*

The whole of this Chapter, Ezekiel 34 is a strong, strong indictment against the leadership of God's people, ancient Israel and shows us *the importance to God of faithful leadership – of faithful human leadership*. Leadership on the ground. And not merely the importance to God, *but the passion that God feels when that leadership is not present*. The anguish, the pain that God feels when that leadership is not present. When there is a leadership vacuum.

- Where the leaders become corrupt or self-serving, when they simply become lazy or they become blind, and when they forget the model of leadership given to us by God – *servant leadership that is proactive, always noticing with eyes, with right vision, the needs of people and stepping in to respond.*
- When they forget that model of leadership God is in pain. Where there are no people to search and seek and rescue and gather and bind up and strengthen and provide food and shelter for the flock of God, God is in anguish and in pain.

And his anger erupts and he says through Ezekiel, "I'll throw them out. I'll start again. I'll do it myself. I'll give my people the kind of leadership they need. I'll send them a true model of faithful leadership that they cannot ignore or avoid." Once again back to Ezekiel 34:

Therefore you shepherds hear the word of the Lord. I'm against the shepherds. I will demand my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding of the sheep.

[And then at Verse 15 God says I'll step into the picture myself]. I myself will be the shepherd of the sheep. I will make them lie down says the Lord God. I will seek the lost if nobody else will do it. I will bring back the strayed. I will bind up the injured. I will strengthen the weak. But the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David [DR: that is, the Messiah]. He shall feed them and be their shepherd and I the Lord will be their God and my servant David shall be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

Leadership – God seeking leadership. Faithful servant leadership, modeled by and embodied most clearly in the one shepherd, the Good Shepherd, the descendent of King David whom he would send into the world; the one we acknowledge as our own Lord Jesus Christ.

- **When it's there**, this leadership, God rejoices. The sheep, the flock, the people, the community, the church, the city, all flourish and become in

some part like the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Heaven – a little wisp of Heaven on Earth.

- **But when it's missing**, when that leadership is missing in the heart of God and in human society there is pain and sorrow, there is confusion and lostness, there is ineffectiveness in the name of God.

And we see this story throughout the length and the breadth of scripture. There are many stories going on in scripture but one of the stories that weaves its way from the beginning of scripture to the end is *the story of the importance of leadership to God*: when it's there and when it's not! The impact of its presence and the impact of its absence.

Let me lead you very quickly through this message in our Bible.

The second book of the Bible: Exodus. In the story of Exodus, the people of God are initially slaves. They are slaves in Egypt. They are helpless and they are powerless under a force that controls them . . . until a leader comes along, until Moses comes along. And their lives are changed because of this one person who has entered their existence and transforms their situation and they are on their way out of slavery across the Red Sea toward the Promised Land.

The Book of Joshua. And that leadership lasts for another generation under Joshua. So you move from the book of Exodus to the book of Joshua and the leadership is great, and so too are the lives of God's people.

But when you move to the Book of Judges, the leadership is gone. It is scattered. It is all over the place. And the result of this is seen in the chaotic and bizarre stories that are told, and in a phrase that is used at the end of the book of Judges (17:6, 21:25): "everybody did what was right in their own eyes." The tribes have disintegrated. There is no power; there is no strength to bear witness to God.

The 1st Book of Samuel. Things go downhill from there. They get worse until God raises up another leader – until the prophet Samuel comes along.

1st and 2nd Samuel. And then King David comes along and the tribes of Israel are united and the kingdom grows and expands and wonderful things happen until the leader fails to lead. Until David instead of being with his armies is at home, commits adultery with Bathsheba. And from that moment on you can see the kingdom begin to disintegrate.

1 Kings. Once again the power of leadership lasts for a generation, through the reign of King Solomon. And then it goes!

2 Kings. Without great leadership the tribes of Israel begin to divide and while there are some good and bad kings the bad kings predominate and Israel goes downhill until they are back in slavery again, living in exile under the power of the Assyrians, under the power of the Babylonians, and under the power of the Persians. And then (after the Old Testament is completed, and bringing us into New Testament times, the time of Jesus and the early church) under the power of the Greeks, under the power of the Romans, with no great leader to lead God's flock.

And as the story continues through Jesus' ministry into the story of the early church, the example of leadership, the power of leadership, and God's quest for faithful leaders who will lead his flock to be effective servants of his in the world continues!

God is on the prowl, looking, searching for those who proactively will be his servants to care for others with new eyes to notice others in their need – to guide, to teach, to lead.

And not just in great positions of prominence but wherever we are, wherever we can impact another. To lead, in our homes and in our places of work in the spiritual realm and the secular realm – in the private realm and the public world. God, on the prowl, a constant story weaving itself through scripture, looking not just 'out there' for a leader, but looking towards us! . . . and saying 'Will you, will you be the shepherd that I need, to lead my flock where you can, where you are, to touch the lives of others close to you? Such leadership is my desire!' This is what he says to us.

And this passion of God, this search of God, is lurking in the background of our chapter in John Chapter 10. God's search, God's anguish as he looks for those who will rise up and be leaders under the faithful leadership of the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. His call is for all of us. Not just to enter the pulpit, not just to be a minister, but in every realm of life to reflect in our lives the leadership that God has shown to us.

For some of us, perhaps even all of us this may be a rather scary thought, that God's gaze is fixed on us, on every single one of us, saying to us "where you are will you be a leader?" To answer this call positively, however, may seem to us to be risky and fraught with problems. After all, if Jesus indicts those whose leadership is imperfect maybe he will indict us too?

- How do we know that we will not fail the test if we step up to the plate?
- How do we know that we will be able to stand the heat if we find ourselves in the midst of this?
- How do we know that we'll be able to maintain the pace?

The answer to that question of course is that *we don't!* We don't. Leadership almost by definition is a risky business. Here's the flock and it's safe to be part of the group. The leader, however, steps out front . . . and as soon as you disassociate yourself or move apart from the flock you're a target! . . . as soon as you do that there is no guarantee of safety! But, and this is the great good news, for Christians there is the promise that *every shepherd of the flock will have a leader, a good shepherd who will stay close to them and will never let them go.*

Indeed this is of enormous importance as we read John Chapter 10. It is, of course, critical that we know, when we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, that he is there to comfort us like a lamb he holds us, he embraces us. But it is even more critical to know that when he holds us and embraces us, he does not do it just so we can remain as we are. He promises us that care *precisely so that when we step out to lead and play our part in his kingdom we can know assuredly that he will be with us every step of the way.*

That is, he is the Good Shepherd especially for those who choose to be under shepherds in his care and in his service for his namesake.

Let me paraphrase Jesus' teaching in our Chapter again, John Chapter 10. Remember that, in the background, Jesus' initial hearers would have heard any message about 'shepherds' as a clear indictment against the leadership of their own day. And then 'add in' the foreground: the promise that God will be with us as we step out into leadership; promises that you and I must hold on to as well.

So we step out and say, "I will lead in your name, Lord Jesus, not because I want to, not because I crave power, but to be an under-shepherd, a servant leader in your care." We say we will do this,

And he says to us, "if you step out and you play your role in my name I can guarantee you this: that there will be no more exciting adventure that you could find anywhere else." How does the Good Shepherd put it? He says in Verse 10: "I have come that you may have life and have it in all its abundance."

And we say, "Well what if it's dangerous out there?"

So the Good Shepherd turns to us and says to us "I'm not a hired hand. I've already shown you the depth that I will go to protect you. I give my life to you. The hired hand runs away. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep."

But then we say, "What if our energy is low and we cannot do it in our own energy, our own steam?"

He says to us "Of course you cannot do it in your own strength! But I will provide for you the nourishment and protection that you need along the way. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits. But the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. [The word 'saved,' by the way, in the Greek also can mean 'health'] We will find health, true health and strength and find pasture and nourishment.

And what if we say, "But my days of leadership are over. There is no more leadership for me. I'm at the stage of life, the age of life that I cannot, and don't want to lead any more. I don't have the gifts or passion?"

He says to us then, "I'll give you a vision for my work. I'm doing things you have no clue about. There's always a place, whether people notice it or not, where you can lead in my name. For example, I have other sheep," says the Good Shepherd, "that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice so there will be one flock, one shepherd. I'm at work in ways that you don't know. But if you seek to lead in my name I'll give you a part of my pasture where you can be effective in my service. Leadership is always a risk. But, I'll be there and I will never fail you or forsake you.

Some time ago Norman Vincent Peale told this story about a friend of his, Bill Spence, a retired college professor.

When Bill Spence was a young boy growing up in Minnesota he had a significant stammer, a stutter which was highly embarrassing to him. Whenever he was in a classroom and a teacher would ask him to answer a question it just went straight down into his soul, this sense of embarrassment, as he tried to answer. And he knew that his school friends were all laughing at him. In fact, at times they would ask him questions just to hear him stutter and then they would laugh.

So he found himself more and more heading away from others and reading (which in the end was a practice God used, when later Bill became a professor). And he found a job where he didn't have to interact with anybody else. He found a job in a church. Not as a pastor(!) but (and remember, this story took place some time ago), as the person who would light the boilers of the church at 3:00 in the morning. Winter, in Minnesota! Now that's a lonely and cold job! There's nobody out there. He heads to the church. He lights the boiler at 3:00 and he has to stay in this church until the sun begins to shine and people begin to come. And he did this faithfully week after week. As Norman Vincent Peale tells the story this is what happened.

One early morning, while he was waiting after lighting the boiler, Bill picked up a hymnal and began to read some familiar hymns. He knew

most of the hymns by heart but now for the first time he paid attention to the words. Impulsively he began to read the words aloud and suddenly after a few minutes he realized he wasn't stuttering! In amazement he listened to his words, clear and perfectly defined, as they reverberated through the cold empty church.

Surrounded by the rays of the rising sun shining through a colorful stained glass window he looked up and there saw a figure of Jesus in the window who seemed to be smiling down at him saying Bill, speak in my name and don't be afraid. And since that day in the church, says Norman Vincent Peale, Bill Spence has never again stammered or stuttered.

What happened? Well I think he met the Good Shepherd didn't he? The Good Shepherd calling him into service. Not as a minister, not in the church but using his gifts to influence and impact the lives of others through his general Christian testimony to touch their lives where he was, to do what he could, not do by himself, but faithfully under the leadership of the one who called him.

"I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus. I want the best for you. I want to protect you. I want to nourish you. And I want to send you into my world . . . as shepherds under my leadership and I promise that, unlike other leaders, I will be your Good Shepherd. I will never fail you or forsake you.

My friends this is Good News indeed! Thanks be to God.

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