

Follow Me - A Call To US

John 10: 1-21

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It's almost a year ago that Christina dropped in to see my friend Brad. She struggled with low self-esteem, bouts of anxiety and seasons of depression. Non of these were complemented by her struggles with chronic insomnia. That semester she'd been taking courses on environmentalism, feminism, and world history. Did well, too. Top academic marks!

But her world became ever darker.

Each course brought out yet one more example of struggle and injustice and pain somewhere.

And all of that settled inside of Christina, weighing on her, dragging her down.

She and Brad talked about the hopelessness, about the loneliness and the lack of meaning that screamed so loudly inside Christina's head. Some weeks later, she showed up at Brad's church, started reading a bible, attended worship regularly, and hung around with other students at the church.

Then, one day, waiting for a bus, Christina was converted.

Something clicked in her head.

This lonely, tired sheep heard the Good Shepherd.

Right there she prayed and offered her life to Jesus.

She said, "I'd been working so long at trying to make myself happy by cultivating self-esteem and independence. But now, for the first time, I truly believed that Jesus had lifted that burden from my shoulders with his sacrifice on the cross. What a relief to know that making my own life meaningful and worthwhile is not my responsibility! That is God's job."

Christina got it!

She got it that her life has inherent worth because she is created in the image of God;

that she is a child of God;

that God has a plan for her life.

Christina is thankful for this new life she has, and wants to have God be right at the centre of everything she does.

She has a sense of purpose.

She is energized to help people by sharing her gifts and talents.

She has received a gift of better sleep at night.

And her relationships are better, too.

In a hostile world, surrounded by a whole bunch of conflicting voices, confusing voices, Christina finally found a way of life that gave her peace, that was secure, that was right.

Praise God - the life of this sheep is now safe.

She is in the sheepfold.

[adapted from *Campus Ministry @ Dalhousie*, March 2008;
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Christina is among those of whom Jesus spoke in John 10. To understand this chapter a bit better you really first need to read and appreciate the preceding chapter, John 9. Jesus heals a fellow who had been blind since birth. Only - he does it in a way that runs counter to social norms and the expectations of the religious establishment. He breaks pretty much every rule and convention. The elite of the community see the healing, and see the rule breaking. What matters to them is **NOT** that someone has a whole new chance at living - the blind man, who now can see. That's not really important. What matters is that the rules have been broken - their authority has been called into question; social convention is being challenged. And **that** cannot be allowed to continue.

John 10 is, first of all, Jesus' response to the political and religious officials in his community. They are, he says, just a bunch of mercenaries out to line their own pocket, predators who didn't

care one whit about the people, and who would raise up all sorts of false standards and false values and false rules & regulations just to perpetuate their status quo.

His condemnation prophetically echoes Ezekiel 34, where God blasts the nation's leaders, saying:

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet? (Ezk 34.18-19)

"...I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered... I will place over them one shepherd... and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd."

Middle-Eastern shepherds did not have large flocks where the sheep were merely one lanolin-soaked lump among many others. Often the flocks were small and the shepherd and his family had intimate knowledge of each one. It was not uncommon for the family to view these sheep as pets. Each was named. Each was special.

As Jesus condemned notoriously unreliable political, social, moral and religious leaders and institutions, he also presents an alternative to his listeners, and to Christina... and to you... and to me.

He, the Son of the Sovereign Lord who tends his flock like a shepherd, who gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; who gently leads those that have young makes a great claim for himself.

I AM the gate to a good, shepherd-led life
I AM the good shepherd himself.

It is a great claim.

It is also a singular claim.

I am, says Jesus, the one through whom people can find life, safe life, meaningful life, sure life..... I am the gate - but only me. Just one gate. Me.

And I am the one who will know, and watch, and care for, and eternally protect everyone who enters that life.... I am the good shepherd - but only me. Just one shepherd. Me.

And **that**, friends, is the claim and the offer which Christina accepted.

And which has turned her life around.

She is one of the "other sheep" that Jesus spoke about in verse 16.

You know, I have met so many people that walk around with some vague notion of who God is - "The Big Guy," "The Man Upstairs." Such language betrays an understanding of God as someone far away, impersonal, impassive, uncaring or feeling.

The truth is far different.

Jesus says, "The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, he calls them by name, he gives them life in the fullest possible way.... I am the Good Shepherd."

It is a claim supported by Psalm 139:

You are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb... when I was woven together your eyes saw my unformed body.

And Matthew 10 where we are told that the God who knows about every single bird that lives or dies on the face of the earth pays such close attention to you that he knows every time when so much as one hair falls from your head.

And it is a claim supported by the events we commemorated last weekend.
 Good Friday - the death of Jesus; the Good Shepherd authoritatively laying down his life for the sheep. Dark, and heavy.

Easter Sunday - resurrection; the Good Shepherd, with full heavenly authority, taking up his life again.

Not running away when things got dangerous and saving his own skin. No - he deliberately went all the way to death. But then powerfully punched through the back of death's prison - the great, eternal jail-break, as it were! Taking with him all who place their faith and trust in him. That they, along with him, would have the right to eternal life with God in glory.

Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep.... and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Can you trust Jesus - one who laid down his life for you?

Judge for yourselves!

Have you given yourself to that Jesus of Easter?

Believing that he knows your name?

Believing that your future is safe when entrusted to him?

Believing that following him is the best way to live?

Friends, we live in a culture which fosters lifestyles for many of us that are not that much different than that of the hamster and its owner. You know that routine, right? Hamsters, their little cages, the wheel.

Michael Treston tells us that each morning Sam - that's his name - hits the wheel, stopping only to snatch a bite to eat. He's driven by some ingrained belief that all the effort is getting him somewhere. And so off he goes –

Trudge, trudge, run, run,

nibble, nibble, drink, drink,

With the only occasional treats to break the monotony.

That's Sam's life.....

.....And life for Sam's pet hamster is almost as bad.

In her own way Christina was caught on a hamster wheel.

Running - hard - looking for meaning and direction in her life.

And it was proving to be both unsatisfying and rather dangerous.

Many of us run, too, chasing false shepherds - without finding satisfaction.

Running after a high-paying, fast-moving career won't satisfy, won't let you sleep better, or feel more positive or face a new week with hope and a sense of purpose - no matter how many hucksters come along telling you that it will.

Inner peace isn't found by getting involved in a life of service in the public sector.

Or even through working in the NGO sector, fighting poverty and injustice -

On its own, as a way to find meaning and direction in life – it won't satisfy. It can't.

And the good time living - be it in a bar, or an Imax theatre, or on the sports field,

yes, yes, I know - it looks great on TV.

yes, yes, I know - the stars seem to have it pretty good.

Behind that, though, is something deeply predatory.

If you are heading to those places looking to make your life good and meaning filled and satisfied, watch out! It will eat you up, and spit you out.

And you'll be left empty, robbed.

Oh, yes - there is someone who is most probably profiting from it....

....but it won't be you!

Perhaps you are single, and wishing you were in a relationship. The loneliness runs deep. I'm not saying that looking for a partner is wrong. Just know that it will not answer the deepest longings of your soul.

Maybe you're sitting at home, feeling restless, wondering if moving to a different home - perhaps a condo, or a bigger place, or one in the country - will get rid of the restless feeling.

Again, the answer is, No.

Or going for one more level up the educational ladder. One more course. One more degree. Fine, all, in themselves. But that inner nagging - it won't go away when you do these things.

The only one who can offer you a sense that,
yes, somehow in the grand scheme of this spinning wheel of a cosmos, your life has value, and is noticed

and,

yes, your future is secure -

the one who stands holding the gate open for you to enter that kind of a life;

the one who promises to stand guard over you while you live that kind of a life;

is Jesus.

And, as a voice for Jesus today, in this place and at this time,

I am inviting each one of you to commit your life to following the Good Shepherd.

➤ Our culture is incredibly noisy.

Stand just about anywhere in this city, and you'll know that to be true.

➤ It is very rushed.

Go anywhere here on Merivale Rd, and you'll see it displayed.

➤ Things aren't very predictable.

Watch the stock market this past year, and that is clear.

And into our clanging, frenetic, fickle lives

comes the voice of Jesus. Inviting us to give his life a try.

To come on in.

And trust our future to his care.

Will you do that?

As you consider that, there's one thing I hope you noticed.

You noticed, I hope, that Jesus talks not only of life in the sheepfold, but also about going to good pastures.

The sheepfold is picture language for a living relationship with him.

The pasture is picture language for getting out, moving, exercise.

For life out there.

For active living out there in a way that nourishes, rather than drains you.

Which is what Christina is now experiencing.

She is not living an isolated or insulated life. And Jesus isn't calling us to a hide-away life, either.

Christina isn't hiding inside her church building every day. She still wants to tackle issues of injustice against women, and problems in the environment. But she does it with the confidence that come what may, she always remains a valued child of God. And her eternity is secure.

Yes, her new Christian faith is freeing her up to serve with even more vigour. For now she can engage issues in human rights and in the environment as an apprentice to, as a disciple of Jesus.

It's her way of showing love to Him...

...Rather than her way of finding worth in life.

He gave the worth....

...Her work grows out of that Jesus -established worth.

There's a huge difference between these! I hope you can see that!

And you, too, will find that when you surrender your life to Jesus, whole new areas of life may open up - new pastures for you to explore.

Places and situations and times where you can stretch, and perhaps be challenged, and certainly take risks, and even joining Jesus in prophetically challenging harmful elements of the status quo in society.

Knowing that whatever the outcome of your adventures may be, it'll be OK. Because all your living is done under the Good Shepherd's watchful gaze.

Jesus said -

"Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good - a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it."

Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good - sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for - will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

"I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary. A hired man is not a real shepherd. The sheep mean nothing to him. He sees a wolf come and runs for it, leaving the sheep to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf. He's only in it for the money. The sheep don't matter to him.

"I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. In the same way, the Father knows me and I know the Father. I put the sheep before myself, sacrificing myself if necessary. You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them, too. They'll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one Shepherd. This is why the Father loves me: because I freely lay down my life. And so I am free to take it up again. No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own free will. I have the right to lay it down; I also have the right to take it up again. I received this authority personally from my Father." [John 10:1-19 *The Message*]