

**“Our of the Brambles – An Invitation”**

Date: April 25, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

Occasion: Easter 4

Theme: Shepherd image, deliverance

A number of years ago there was a popular TV show called “Candid Camera.” A more recent variety of it was called ‘Pranked’, in which unknowing persons were caught on camera in funny situations.” In the original show, on this one episode, the crew set up their hidden cameras in a high school counseling office in the Bronx.

An actor pretended to be a guidance counselor, offering career guidance to various students. One unsuspecting student came in for the results of his career aptitude test. He was not prepared for what he was told. The so-called counselor informed him the tests indicated he was best suited to be a shepherd.

The student just sat and stared at the counselor. Living in the Bronx, he was totally unfamiliar with this concept. He asked the counselor, “What’s a shepherd?” When shown a picture of a shepherd watching over sheep, he tried to convince the counselor there had been some mistake, and that he was not cut out for such a life.

At that point, Alan Funt, the director of the show, steps out and explained to him that he had been pranked and was on national television. I wonder how many of us really understand what that lifestyle would involve. Do we *really* appreciate the concept any better than the high school senior from New York?

Granted, the notion of shepherd is more powerful for the Jew of first century Palestine than for a high school student in the Bronx. Even for us, the picture gets lost on us, whose exposure to shepherds is mainly in the

form of plastic figurines at Christmas-time, and whose familiarity with sheep is by way of lamb chops or a toddler's stuffed toy. Metaphors work best when we experience them first-hand, but if we reflect for a moment, the image still speaks very loudly.

Lest the message be missed, Jesus pointed out the meaning of his shepherd image. By drawing the distinction between the shepherd and the hired hand, he made it clear that His relationship with us is not some kind of divine duty. Jesus cares about the direction we're headed, even when we do not care.

Perhaps a parent can understand Jesus' meaning best when Jesus presents himself as shepherd. What parent does not know what it means to care even when their child does not appear to? What parent doesn't know what it means to love a child, whether she or he is sick, or lost, or confused, or even rebellious and difficult?

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, cares for us in all of those situations. He cares for us even more than we do for ourselves.

If you saw the movie *Forrest Gump*, you may recall the scene in Viet Nam when Lieutenant Dan was seriously injured. Forrest Gump saved his life, even though the Lieutenant didn't want to be saved. Gump's desire to save was greater than his commanding officer's desire to live. Only later did the lieutenant become grateful for what Forrest had done.

A sheep that is trapped in the brambles will squeal and resist when a shepherd tries to free it from danger. But a good shepherd will ignore the squealing and save the sheep. A tired sheep will lie down even in a dangerous place, but the good shepherd will pick it up and carry it to safety.

Most of you will likely have heard the poem "Footprints in the Sand" before. It tells the story of a person who gets to heaven and is shown the

life she has lived as a double set of footprints in the sand. She asked, “Why two sets?” and was told that one set was made by Jesus walking alongside her. But then she saw only one set of footprints and asked what that meant. She was told, “Those are the time when you were being carried by Christ.”

My dear friends, Jesus will carry us over the rough spots of doubt and fear. He will lift us out of despair, bringing us to a better place. His caring is more powerful than our own lack of care when it comes to what is best for us. Each of us matter to Jesus, even when Jesus doesn’t matter to us.

There are times in our lives when we each fall into the brambles of life – when life become difficult and challenging, and we wonder how we’re ever going to get out of the mess we find ourselves in. Sometimes, the brambles are not our fault – we lose our job, we have a health crisis, our partner unexpectedly leaves us – either because of an affair or because of death. We find ourselves caught in feelings of frustration and anger, worry and even despair. How will we ever get out of this mess?

Sometimes the crisis is of our own creation. We spend more money than we can afford, and we find the bills overwhelming. Perhaps a spouse leaves us and tells us it’s our fault, and we can see that they’re right. Maybe we have one too many drinks and we decide to get behind the wheel of the car, and on the way home we cause an accident, and someone is killed, or seriously injured.

Many times, the mess we find ourselves in is indeed our own fault. Will Jesus still care for us, even when we’re the one who created the mess? Will he still offer us his help? Does God still love us, even when we blow it? The answer is unequivocal, “Yes, he will.” But we have a choice.

You see, sheep may squeal, and they may rebel. They can be as stubborn as an animal can be. The shepherd helps anyway. But there’s a

difference between us and sheep. God has given us the ability to say, “No,” to the help which is offered us. That’s just the way it is when love is offered.

Jesus continues to love us and care for us, even when we’re in the brambles of life, and we’re kicking and screaming about it. He comes to us and offers us his love and assistance. But we can refuse to accept it. You see, we can allow ourselves to be carried by Jesus who calls himself our shepherd, or we can respond with the arrogance of a child who is convinced they know better, “I don’t need your help; I don’t want you help.”

Jesus leaves that choice to us. No real lover forces him or herself on anyone. And Jesus is exactly that – a real lover. He keeps returning to us, even when it seems like we don’t care anymore. That’s what a good shepherd does. He never gives up. But he always respects our free will to say “No,” to his love.

Is it possible that John 10:11-18 is meant for *you*? Is it possible, *now* may be one of those times when Jesus has come back to pick you up, and help pull you out of the brambles? Just because we’re baptized doesn’t mean we don’t still foolishly wander into the brambles which allow us to be choked.

Just because we partake of the Lord’s Supper, or we’ve sung the hymns of the church, doesn’t exempt us from wandering off in directions which get us into trouble. It may well be that all we have to do, at least for starters, is to stop squealing and allow ourselves to be lifted out of whatever it is that entangles us.

Let us pray: “Lord Jesus, this problem is too big for me to figure out alone. I’ll stop fighting and resisting. Lord, I need your help. Help me to do what I can’t do by myself. Amen.”