April 17 –
Sermon:
God's Sheepdog
Scripture: Psalm 23

Jesus called himself the good shepherd. This implies that we are to be sheep that faithfully follow. Taking this further, when we read Psalm 23 it implies that as a sheep, God will give us everything we need, lead us through the dark valleys and we will live in the house of the Lord forever. All of these are good things, things to celebrate. But, I want to challenge this whole idea. Ever since I returned from Ireland I have been unimpressed with the idea of being a sheep. What I want to be is God's sheepdog! Since dogs were not used then or now in Palestine to herd sheep, Jesus would never have used this metaphor, but I believe it more realistically embraces what we are called to do and be as a Christian. It moves us from passive acceptance, which is pretty much the roll of the sheep to the shepherd, to active engagement.

Training is important! When we talked to the Irish shepherd he told about how, when he is ready to begin training a new sheep dog, he looks over pups when they are about eight weeks old, looking for certain traits. Finding what he is looking for, he then begins training. When someone asked, "When are they fully trained?" His reply was, "Never." Training is a lifelong process.

How would our faith life be different if we understood that we were always in training? What would it mean to understand that there are new things to learn, old skills to sharpen? A sheep just follows the shepherd. A sheepdog must interact with the shepherd and so these skills must continually be honed.

What is our training as disciples? It will mean different things to different people, but here are a few that I can think of. Daily prayer and Bible study. A sheepdog has to learn how to respond to various whistles while ignoring others. We need to learn how to respond to God's call in our lives and ignore the temptations of the world. This is done through prayer, meditation and Bible study. It isn't something we can do once in a while and be good at it. Temptations are always around us. It is easy to give into them if we are not consciously looking out for them and figuring out how to ignore them. We are

also called to respond to people in certain ways as a Christian. Just because today you are good at forgiving someone doesn't mean you will be able to do it the next time, unless you are constantly reminded that this is what you are to do. It takes discipline and training. It takes responding to the shepherd's signal and ignoring the world's view of "Don't get mad, get even."

Training also involves attending worship and being involved in some form of study group. Again these are ways to keep us engaged with the shepherd. It is a form of training. How well are you doing?

A second thing you notice when you watch a sheepdog at work is that they always keep their eye on the shepherd. The shepherd has their undivided attention, even while they are working the sheep and doing what they are commanded to do. What does this single minded focus mean for us when it comes to our faith?

For some people it has led to fanaticism. You know the type. In trying to always have their eye on Jesus they create an image of faithfulness and then challenge any and all who do not agree with them. They are in an, "I'm right and you are wrong" mindset.

For me keeping my eye on the shepherd means that I strive each day to remember my job which is to love others as I love God. I start each day with a reminder that I am going to have all sorts of people to deal with today. Some of these will be pleasant encounters but I will also be challenged by some of the interactions. What does it mean to be loving in those situations? At the end of each day I go back and reflect on my interactions for the day and ask, "How well did I do?" I celebrate the successes, those times my eye was on the shepherd and I did well, and ask for forgiveness for those times I let my agenda distract me.

Another way I keep my eye on the shepherd is to pick one area that I know I need to be working on in my faith life. Perhaps I am struggling with forgiving someone, or maybe I am feeling angry, or I have been so busy that I have not taken the time I need for prayer and meditation. Whatever it is, I set myself daily or weekly goals. All of this is just a reminder that we have to keep our inner eye focused on Jesus. If we do not

do this, then we will not be doing the job we are called to do. This is why I think we are like sheepdogs and not sheep. Sheep do what they are told, more or less, sheepdogs have to be focused and engaged.

Let me give you one example. I knew I was going to have a challenging meeting that day. There were strong emotions flowing around an issue. I realized there might be some personal attacks occurring. I spent much time in prayer thinking through all these scenarios trying to remember what I am asked to do in faith. I thought I was prepared but then one of the people who had been so supportive in the meeting said they couldn't support the project and were upset that I kept pushing it. I could feel an immediate negative response coming to my lips. But before I said anything I thought, "If so and so had said this I would not have been surprised. Why be upset now?" I took a deep breath and instead of responding as I first felt, I asked them to explain their change in thinking. They actually had some very good points and shifted all of us in the meeting to looking at the project in a different light. Ultimately their concerns led us to a middle ground that all could embrace. It is something that would not have happened if I, or another, had shut them down. By keeping my eyes on the shepherd I was in a position to be alert to God's nudging.

Finally, a sheepdog responds quickly to the commands given. They have to for them to move the sheep where the shepherd commands. I was amazed when the shepherd asked someone in the crowd to point to one of the sheep in a flock of five. He then, using whistles, voice commands and two sheepdogs, isolated that sheep from the rest. It would not have happened if the dogs had not been trained, kept their eyes on the shepherd and responded immediately to the commands.

This is something we often fail at. We get the nudging to do something and think, maybe later. Or we hear we are to forgive and instead of doing so give the reasons we won't forgive, at least at this time. We are resistant to following the commands of the shepherd unless they are comfortable and predictable. God usually challenges us to do things that move us out of our comfort zone. We know this brings about growth but we resist. We are not always a good sheepdog. Yet, when you see someone move quickly and dramatically to a nudge from God it can be scary.

In one of my churches I had Doug come in to see my on a Tuesday. He said, "Because of your sermon on Sunday I quit my job." He said, "You talked about figuring out your priorities and if things get in the way you need to eliminate them. I thought about how I wanted to spend time with my two boys and work had become so demanding, with so much overtime that I rarely had any time for them. So, taking your advice as a word from God, I quit." I wanted to say, "You fool. Just because I preach it doesn't mean you are to follow it!" He was an electrician and so he knew he would find other work. His wife had a good job so there was no chance of them starving. He wanted to enjoy his boys. He did find a job with more regular hours. He was able to invest time with his boys at a time they really needed it. He also made a commitment to do more in the church. Seeing him recently he said, "That was the best choice ever. I am glad I heard and responded immediately. If I had over thought it I would never have done it."

So do you see why I am not interested in being a sheep? I don't want to be led, to be fed, to be taken care of. As good as that sounds, I want to be engaged. I want to be a good sheepdog. A sheepdog still is fed and taken care of but is also required to act and respond. So may we continue in our training, keep our eyes on the shepherd and respond when we hear his command.