

**“WHO CARES?”**  
***Psalm 23; John 10:22-30***  
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I was on my way to a meeting. I was getting on the interstate in one of our area’s rather affluent suburbs and went under a bridge. There to my right was a sight I had never seen before in that community: a disheveled and rather weather-beaten looking man sitting slumped over under the bridge. With him was a knapsack of belongings. He was unshaven and wearing a worn-out coat. Does this man have any family or friends who could help him, I wondered. Is he aware of the many social agencies in our community? Although it was impractical for me to do anything to help him (after all, we already take our lives in our hands when we are on ramps entering the freeway, without stopping to investigate a person who may be mentally deranged and dangerous), a picture of this man sticks in my mind.

An office worker I know lives alone in an apartment. Before she goes to bed at night, she sets her clock radio to a talk station so that when she wakes up in the morning, she will hear the sound of a human voice. Self-admittedly, she is lonely and alone.

Sometimes I will share with someone something that is heavy on my heart. Instead of getting a response of caring and concern, it will be as if my words went right on by. His or her mind is on something else, and my concern doesn’t even hit the radar screen. Have you ever had that happen to you? I wonder. Is anybody listening? Does anybody care?

There is much in our world to make us wonder if anybody is paying attention, and more importantly, does anybody care? We read about corruption in government, both locally and globally, and we wonder, how could all this go on for so long without anybody blowing the whistle? We see television news stories of abuse and neglect; we read of scams in the financial world; we continue to hear horror stories concerning children and the elderly, and we wonder. Does anybody care?

Our faith tells us that **God cares**, and that God demonstrated that caring most dramatically by sending Jesus to our world. Here was someone who cared deeply about people -- all people --- but especially about those whom the rest of society sometimes forgets or wants to ignore. In the first century, the Jews were looking for a Messiah who would change the world ---- someone who would right the wrongs of society and usher in a new day when people would live by a strong moral compass rather than to themselves and for themselves. As Christians, we believe that in Jesus the Messiah has come. But alas, the world looks pretty much as it did before his arrival! In our Jewish-Christian dialogue one of the rabbis said to me, “You say the Messiah has come, but what has changed? What is different because of Jesus?”

Well, Jesus has made a huge difference in my own life. He has made a huge difference in the lives of millions of other Christians through the centuries and around the world. But to the unbelieving eye, the world may not look all that different than it did before Jesus arrived. Jesus

came to bring peace and justice to our world. But there are still wars. In fact, more people are losing their lives through violent means today than ever before in human history. Hunger and disease still stalk the globe. Poverty has not been eradicated, and the problems of human relationships are as intense as ever.

Was he the Messiah? Folks ask that question in our day. Folks asked that question when Jesus walked the earth. In this morning's Gospel lesson, the people ask, "*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.*" (John 10:24)

Jesus responds by saying, "Open your eyes! Don't you see what I am doing? I am healing the sick, restoring the sight of the blind, curing the lame, and giving the broken-hearted a new lease on life. I am bringing hope to those who are depressed and discouraged." Then he says, "*You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me*" (10:27)

When couples bring their young children to worship, they are always concerned that their babies and little children will make too much noise and distract the other worshippers. I always say, "Children in worship don't bother me, except for my own!" When my sons were babies, and Barb would bring them to worship, they were fine until Daddy got up to preach. Then they would recognize the sound of my voice, and start to make noises and sounds. Of course, the congregation got a big kick out of that, but eventually, their baby talk got so distracting that Barb had to take them out of the worship service. Either that or I would have needed to stop preaching! My sons recognized Daddy's voice, and they responded to it. Jesus said, "*My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me.*" Is he the Messiah? Do you recognize his voice?

An earnest youth group member said, "I wish I could just see God." A member of an adult Bible study group comments, "I just wish God would give me a sign about what to do next." John's Gospel helps us to see God and know God's will. Jesus' ministry, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection reveal God to us. If we want to know God, then we look to Jesus. In him we see a God who cares, a God who is willing to die for us and forgive us, and a God who calls us to follow where he leads.

In this passage Jesus refers to himself as a caring shepherd. We cannot read these verses without being reminded of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, where God is held up as the epitome of the shepherd, who expends all his energy caring for his flock. In our modern culture, we sometimes have trouble understanding this pastoral image of a shepherd and the sheep. Most of us did not grow up on a farm. We may have only seen sheep at the petting zoo or on television. Statisticians tell us that there is not one working farm left in Cuyahoga County. Yet as a symbol of caring, we have a difficult time coming up with a better image than the near eastern shepherd, who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

Will you think with me for a few moments about this wonderful picture of God that comes from the Psalms? Whenever I have a funeral, I always ask the family if there is a passage of Scripture that they want read, and if the person who died had a favorite Scripture. The most often-mentioned text is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Why is that? Well, it is personal. And the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm tells us beyond the shadow of a doubt that **God cares**. Not only does God care; **God cares about us**. Somebody is listening to our concerns, our problems and our frustrations. Somebody cares! And that somebody is God.

The Psalmist tells us that when we are down, when we are weary, when our resources are depleted, God restores our souls! It is a comfort to know that when we are down, God is there, and God stands ready to lift us up again.

When we go through the dark valleys --- even the valley of death --- we are not alone. God is always by our side. I love the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm where the Psalmist asks, “*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I hide from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*” (139:7-8) Even when we are going through hell, God is with us. Think of it! God is always by our side.

Not only is God with us, God’s pours the abundance of his grace upon us. “*You anoint my head with oil,*” the Psalmist says. In the days of the Old Testament, three groups of people were anointed, or given God’s special blessing: prophets, priests and kings. Prophets spoke for God. They were the preachers. Priests provided the bridge between God and the people. They offered sacrifices for the people’s sins and offered God’s forgiveness to those who were repentant. The kings were the leaders: They, also, were anointed by God. Oil was placed on their heads with a prayer that they would govern wisely and justly.

God calls all of us to be prophets, priests and kings. He anoints our heads with oil so that we will speak for him, offer his forgiveness to others, and make wise and equitable decisions. That is our calling as sons and daughters of God. God not only is by our side. God blesses us and equips us to serve him in the world.

I remember visiting two sisters in Youngstown when I served a church there. They lived in a neighborhood that had become quite rough. When I knocked on their front door it took a few minutes for them to let me in. You see, they had about eight locks and deadbolts on the door. They had to turn this key and slide that bar before I could come in. I felt sorry for those women. They lived in fear, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The Psalmist tells us that we need not fear. To put it in the words of the song that the Chancel Choir sang so beautifully, “*Tender God, who embraces us with love, through the ages you have told us, ‘Fear not.’ Whisper it again in our ears; write it on our hearts.*” When we trust in God, we have nothing to fear. Even though the world may be a fearful place, God’s love is stronger than the evil forces of this world, and God’s protection will ultimately prevail. Over and over again in the Bible we are told: do not be afraid. Have no fear. Fear can paralyze us. With the Good Shepherd by our side, we have nothing to fear. The Psalmist reassures us that we are in God’s care. We are safe and secure.

The caring shepherd, who restores our weary souls --- who blesses us beyond the limits of our imagination, and who protects us from every danger --- this caring shepherd is a picture of the God we worship. That’s the kind of God we have. That’s the kind of God people are yearning for. That’s the kind of God we need to proclaim to the world.

Sometimes I get concerned about the impression the world may be getting of us as a church. Sometimes all people see is the offbeat stuff that is on television or the signs in front of our church buildings. During Lent, the *Plain Dealer* ran a list of all the churches that were having fish fries. Another congregation is known for its spaghetti dinners.

What are we known for at Church of the Saviour? Recently a woman came to meet with me from an area agency, and she said, “You know, this church has a reputation for its generosity. Did you know that?” I pray it is so! My prayer every day is that this congregation will be known for the love that is shown by its members in Christ’s name. My constant prayer is that when we sing, “*They’ll know we are Christians by our love,*” it will not be just a nice chorus, but a definition of who we are and what we are all about.

People asked Jesus, “Are you the Messiah?” People are asking today, “Who is this Jesus that you keep talking about?” I am told that sheep are not very bright animals. But they know enough to follow the shepherd. Sometimes we wonder about Jesus’ analogy between dumb

animals and his followers. It's not too flattering, is it? But you know, sometimes in our sophistication we forget or lose sight of the fact that we are called not to debate, to argue, to intellectualize, or to philosophize, but to follow. Sheep do that very well. God expects us to do that, too.

One night a little boy's parents listened to his prayer and tucked him into bed. They thought he was sound asleep when a storm came up and it started to lightning and thunder. All of a sudden the little boy appeared in his parents' bedroom, scared to death. "I'm afraid of the lightning and the thunder," he exclaimed! "I want to stay with you in your room tonight."

"Go back to bed son," his dad said. "You don't need to be afraid of the storm. You will not be alone. God will protect you."

"I know God is with me and God will protect me, Daddy," the little boy replied, "But tonight I need somebody with skin on!"

How much like that little boy we all are! When the storms of life come our way, we need somebody **with skin on** to remind us that God cares, that God cares about us. Jesus came to show us how to care for one another. He is the shepherd who is with us in every circumstance of life. He calls us to follow --- to do what he did and to be there for each other.

**Who cares?** God cares about all people. God cares about each one of us, and God calls us to care for one another. May we demonstrate God's love and care in every circumstance of life.

Prayer: Tender shepherd, thank you for caring for each of us. May we follow your example in reaching out and caring for others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.