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Read: Psalm 23
John 10: 11- 18

“Are You Being Led Astray?”

Many people over the years have asked me why I became a minister. I have a few stories to tell along that line, but today I want to tell you about how I almost didn't become a minister.

Even though I was very young when I realized that I would become a minister I had no idea of how that would happen. Of course I knew that there was training involved, that wasn't the issue.

When I was young it seemed that most ministers in churches and leaders in business were men with military experience – either from World War I or World War II - and they had a very clear idea of what leadership was. They had learned about it in the military and it involved having a higher position than those you were leading. From this position you were seen as having authority. Authority was what made you a leader. Those ranked below you would follow your orders or direction simply because you were the leader. Decisions were made at the top and flowed down to the bottom where they would be carried out.

The other image of a minister often lifted up in my youth was that of a shepherd leading the flock. Congregations were often referred to as the flock – not an overly flattering concept if you look below the surface.

I almost didn't become a minister because I thought I would have to be either kind of a leader. Even though as a youngster I had been in Cubs and Scouts, and as a teenager I had been in Air Cadets long enough to be Flight Sergeant and could bark orders well enough to move my squad around the parade square, I just didn't see myself as that kind of leader.

Over the years though, ideas about leadership changed – both for ministers in churches and leaders in business. Authority was challenged by the youth in the sixties and women ever since.

Leadership is no longer seen by many as being the top dog, or even more of a top dog than others. Nor is it seen as being the one out front, with everyone else following. Some even think leadership can be from behind.

I remember a President of the University of Alberta in Edmonton who sometimes wore a hat that said, “There go my people, I must catch them, I am their leader.”

Leadership can happen from the middle as well. It can happen from anywhere and in a very real sense we are all leaders, even those who seem to be following. Followers lead by giving assent to the leadership of others and by making apparent their choice of leader. Leading in all ways is necessary. The important thing is whether the style of leadership is appropriate to the situation. A good leader is able to assess the situation and lead in the appropriate way from the most appropriate position.

Leadership is primarily about taking responsibility – both in being able to respond and in owning some aspect of the problem or vision.

It wasn't long after I started working for the church as a youth leader that I realized the problem with the shepherd image. As a youth minister and later as a minister to a congregation, I seldom found myself out in front leading the flock. That is when I realized I was more like a sheepdog. If you have ever seen a sheepdog work, the dog doesn't lead the sheep, the shepherd does. The dog makes sure the sheep are following the shepherd by running around at full speed, looking for those who are wandering astray, then barking and nipping at their heels until they are headed once again in the same direction as the shepherd.

The key to how a modern sheepdog works is listening. The shepherd stands in front or walks ahead of the sheep and gives commands, often by whistling and sometimes using a silent whistle that the dog can hear and apparently the sheep can't.

So leading from the edges, like the sheepdog, doesn't mean being a shepherd and it means more than just listening well, as vital as listening is. Leading from the edges means knowing which shepherd you are serving.

This is where the 23rd Psalm comes in. How often do we simply say or recite the first line, "The Lord is my shepherd." I was once watching a movie in which an old man was reading the Psalm. He said it this way, "The *Lord* is *my* shepherd," and then with amazement and certainty in his voice, "I shall not want!" I suddenly realized that this very first line is not just the start of the psalm, it is a statement of faith, an indication of a choice made about who to follow. That's a choice I had made in my own life and now was given another way to express it – God *is* my shepherd, I don't want anything or anyone else. God is the one I follow, the one I trust, a mystery but less a mystery than those who appear on my TV or computer monitor or in newspapers and magazines.

Who to follow is a major problem in life. We all follow someone or something. Today we are drowning in messages, in advertising and opinions, all wanting to lead us. Even movie and music stars are consulted for their opinions on who to vote for. We can end up so overwhelmed that we resign ourselves to just buying what we are told to buy – in clothing, appliances, politics and religion – believing what we are told to believe, or doing nothing simply to avoid the hassle, the work, of sorting it all out. Take the Swine Flu. How serious is it? Who do we believe? We need a leader, a shepherd, to help us see beyond the rising panic. A leader we can trust to be with us through "the valley of the shadow of death."

In a recent edition of The Observer (April 09, p. 30-31), Julie Kinkaid, author of a new book called Overturning the Tables: Consumerism, Children and the Church, makes this statement: "Marketers are attacking our kids to make them buy stuff." Attacking – a word she chooses deliberately – because marketers are using academic research to manipulate children into buying products. Who is leading our children? Who is the shepherd of our children when they are exposed to over 5000 advertisements a day?

Do we *choose* a shepherd any more or do we simply buy what we are told we should want? I am amazed at how a poem, a poem written about 2500 years ago, can teach us so much.

Another lesson we can learn about leadership from the 23rd Psalm is that leadership is not about being boss.

Listen to what the shepherd does:

- Insists on rest for the weary
- Leads us to waters of stillness
- Leads us through dangerous places
- Protects us from evil
- Prepares us a table, a place of feasting
- Offers us a future of goodness and mercy
- Offers us a home in the universe

This is not what bossy people do. This is about leading by serving. In this Psalm the great and mighty God, presumably with all power to do anything, serves the sheep. Makes sure they have rest and a place to drink, makes sure they have a place free of danger and are safe from evil, makes sure their very lives are celebrated with a feast.

If God can be this kind of leader then so can we. Jesus invites us to be this kind of leader, not to lord it over one another but to serve. Not to be the bossy boss, but to serve. Not to be the one out front, but to be a sheepdog helping others get back on track to follow our good shepherd, the one leading us into right relations, who is available to everyone in every time, regardless of race, or creed, or gender, or orientation, or wealth, or power or shame.

Do you know which shepherd is leading you?

If you don't know then are you being lead astray?

Is there a sheepdog nipping at your heels, trying to help you make good choices?

Amen