



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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Shepherding His Sheep
Ezekiel 34:1-24

“Run of the Arrow,” a western film shot in 1957, is a haunting movie about moving on from defeat and bitterness, and about belonging, really belonging.

The movie opens at Appomattox on the last day of the Civil War. The lead character, a Confederate soldier named O’Meara (played by Rod Steiger), has just shot a Union lieutenant (played by Ralph Meeker). As he checks him over, he hears the lieutenant moan, and takes him to the hospital tent set up outside the house where General Lee has just signed the instrument of surrender.

In O’Meara’s mind, he has fired the last shot of the war. A surgeon removes the bullet from the lieutenant and gives it to O’Meara. Someone later reloads it in a new cartridge and inscribes it for O’Meara, and he always carries it in a pouch, an image of how his hatred and bitterness over the war are eating him alive.

So he decides to go west. He meets up with an elderly Sioux Indian who has been an army scout. They’re taken captive by the Sioux, who plan to kill them. The old Sioux has taught him a lot along the way. Now he teaches him about the run of the arrow.

Here’s how it works. An arrow is shot, they walk to it barefoot, then run, trying to stay out of bow shot until they get away. No one has ever succeeded, and the old scout, who has a bad heart, collapses on the run.

O’Meara stays just ahead, until he collapses at the feet of a Sioux woman, who hides him. Later, he goes to the Sioux chief and declares his victory. No Sioux can ever kill him. He joins the tribe and marries his rescuer.

As time passes, the army comes to the area to build a fort. The chief, Red Cloud, agrees to let them build within a certain corridor, and dispatches O’Meara to be the Sioux’s scout. The lieutenant O’Meara had shot, then rescued, is on the expedition. He’s a hot-head, wanting either to dominate or exterminate the Indians. The captain of the expedition (played by Brian Keith) respects the Indians, strikes up a friendship with O’Meara, and encourages him to let go of his anger. He exemplifies all that’s best in a leader.

When a renegade Indian kills the captain, the eager, arrogant lieutenant takes command. He decides to move the fort outside the corridor, insuring attack by the Sioux. Before the attack, the Sioux send O’Meara in peacefully to warn them. The lieutenant refuses to leave. He’s in charge, and he’ll do things his way no matter what.

The attack begins, and most of the troops are killed. The lieutenant is taken alive, and the Sioux begin to skin him alive. To spare the lieutenant this torture, but still accomplish his execution, O’Meara shoots him with the very bullet he had shot him with before.

Now while the main plot of this movie is about moving on from defeat and bitterness, there’s also a very powerful sub-plot. It’s about leaders—the exemplary captain who leads with respect

and integrity, caring for his troops, in contrast to the arrogant lieutenant, who is the worst kind of leader, putting his own glory and self-advancement above the welfare of his troops.

When leaders lead badly . . .

What happens when leaders don't care for those they lead? That's what had happened in Israel and Judah. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings relate the history of the monarchy of Israel, first as a united nation, then as two separate nations, yet one people. A few kings are OK, even fewer are really good; most are mediocre to bad to *very bad*. They failed to follow the LORD and to care for his people, and often led them astray after the pagan gods around them.

In the ancient world, the image of *shepherd* was often used to describe a king. After all, a good king would, like a good shepherd, guide his people, care for them, and provide for them. But applied to most of Israel and Judah's kings, they were unfaithful, irresponsible, uncaring shepherds. Because of their dereliction, the sheep were scattered and had become defenseless prey. By the time Ezekiel wrote, the northern kingdom of Israel was no more, and the leading citizens of the southern kingdom of Judah were in exile in Babylon.

What would God do?

What would God do about this situation?

Well, when you think about it, there were a number of options that were open to him.

First, *he could simply do nothing*. After all, he had redeemed this people from slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness, and brought them into the Promised Land. It had been an exercise in frustration.

They complained in Egypt, then they complained in the wilderness. They refused to go into the land, then wandered in the wilderness 40 years—still griping and complaining. And after they finally made it into the Promised Land, their corporate life as a nation became a seemingly endless cycle of apostasy, judgment, repentance, and deliverance. Obedience to the covenant, especially the first commandment—**You shall have no other gods before me** (Exodus 20:3)¹—was usually only temporary at best.

When you consider all this, you wonder if this might not be the best option. Along the way, God had considered it a few times—you know, totally destroy the Israelites or leave them completely alone, and just start over. But his character would never let him do it.

Another option would have been *to set up another earthly king to guide his people*.

The problem with that was that this had never worked before. The kings had proven that God could not entrust the care of his people to them. The only time this had seen any real success was with David. He had been a shepherd of sheep, and so he understood what it meant to shepherd God's people. But he still messed up royally.

The Old Testament actually reflects that God was reluctant from the start even to set up a king in Israel, and that he did so only as a concession to the people's desire for a king *they could see*. To that point, the LORD had been their king, ruling through judges and priests and prophets. In response to their desire, he reluctantly appointed Saul king. Saul's own weaknesses created a debacle. Then he raised up David as king to replace Saul. David's reign, despite its crises, went well overall, but it was pretty much all downhill from then on!

So much for this option—it would pretty much just bring more of the same.

So what could God do? What if . . .

What if he decided to be their shepherd *himself*?

What if *he* chose to shepherd his sheep?

What if *he* rescued them from the evil shepherds, and went searching for those who were scattered, and gathered home those who were lost?

What if *he* fed them, led them to good pastures, and made them lie down in safety?

What if *he* cared for the injured and weak and sick?

What if *he* judged between his sheep when one tried to take advantage of the others?

That was it! That was what he would do!

And the way he would do it? *He* would ultimately be their shepherd, but he would set up his servant David—actually a descendant of David, who would be of the same character—to be one shepherd over them, over *all* his scattered people.

The Good Shepherd . . .

He's done that, you know.

That's why Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of David, could stand that day and say in John 10:14-15,

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

What a powerful and beautiful image—a shepherd caring for his sheep. He doesn't drive them like a rancher drives cattle. He leads them. He knows them, has his own names he calls them. They know his voice, and they'll come out of a whole mass of different flocks when he calls. They love and trust him, and follow him.

True, they're not always the brightest animals in the world, and they don't smell the best, but he still loves them and cares for them. He protects them, and guides them to green pastures and still waters.

No wonder the Bible uses this picture over and over to describe God's care for us. *The Lord himself is our shepherd!* That's how he relates to us! That's what Jesus was talking about in John 10 when he described himself as the good shepherd who gives his sheep abundant life! And he laid down his life and took it up again to do it!

In her book *All Is Calm, All Is Bright*, Cheryl Kirking shares the story of a young mother named Brenda. Christmas was coming, but instead of joy, it was bringing her despair. As with so many families in recent years, her husband's job was shaky. If he lost it, they'd have no income. That grim possibility amid all the usual holiday stress was depressing her. Brenda told about how God spoke to her in this situation this way:

Among my numerous responsibilities was teaching my three-year-old's Sunday school class at church. When I looked at the teacher's book, I saw that the lesson was on Jesus, the Good Shepherd. What! The Good Shepherd? I complained. Surely something is wrong here. How does the Good Shepherd relate to the real meaning of Christmas? Besides, city kids can't relate to a shepherd. My low spirit was evident as I criticized everything about this lesson.

Then the time came for class. We survived the art portion of the lesson, gluing cotton balls to sheep pictures, and had our juice and animal crackers.

Then it was circle time. Turning to each rosy-cheeked cherub, I began with, "What is a good shepherd?" To which came my reminder of truth as one tot positively replied, "He picks up his sheep when they fall down."²

Wow! “Out of the mouths of babes,” right? Our Shepherd guides us through this life as we trust in him, providing for us and caring for us as only he can.

And he gives us eternal life—the life of the eternal realm that we begin to experience here and now! And when we leave this life to experience that eternal life in its fullness, he shepherds us through death’s dark valley. He will even guide us then throughout all eternity, as, according to Revelation 7:17,

**“For the Lamb, who is in the midst of the throne, will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

Even through eternity, the Lord will shepherd his sheep!

So would you join me now in giving thanks to our God who shepherds us and in affirming our faith in him by repeating together that beautiful King James Version rendering of Psalm 23?

**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®.

² Cheryl Kirking, *All Is Calm, All Is Bright*, (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2001), 35-36. Cited on www.preachingtoday.com.