

"In His Steps"

"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps."

What would Jesus do?

This is the question that is at the heart of *In His Steps*, a best-selling religious fiction novel written by Charles Monroe Sheldon. First published in 1896, the book has sold over 30 million copies and ranks as one of the best-selling books of all time. The book began as a series of Sunday evening sermons that Sheldon preached to the congregation of Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas that focused on the story of the Rev. Henry Maxwell, pastor of the fictitious First Church of Raymond, Maine, who challenges his congregation to not do anything for a year without first asking, "*what would Jesus do?*"

- "At the close of the service I want all those members who are willing to join such a company to remain and we will talk over the details of the plan. Our motto will be, 'What would Jesus do?' Our aim will be to act just as He would if He was in our places, regardless of immediate results. In other words, we propose to follow Jesus' steps as closely and as literally as we believe He taught His disciples to do. And those who volunteer to do this will pledge themselves for the entire year, beginning with today, so to act."

As a result of Maxwell's sermon, several members of the congregation make life-altering decisions that affect not only themselves but their community. The editor of the local newspaper decides not to publicize a prize fight and discontinue to Sunday edition, leading to a drop in subscriptions. An official with the railroad discovers that his company is committing fraud and resigns his post. Several members go out into the community to care for people in the Rectangle, a notorious district in the city. The simple question with which Maxwell challenged his congregation led to changes not only in Raymond but across the country, so that by the final paragraph Henry Maxwell is pictured dreaming of a movement in which Christians join together under the banner of his life-changing question, "*what would Jesus do?*"

- "He rose at last with the awe of one who has looked at heavenly things. He felt the human forces and the human sins of the world as never before. And with a hope that walks hand in hand with faith and love Henry Maxwell, disciple of Jesus, laid down to sleep and dreamed of the regeneration of Christendom, and saw in his dream a church of Jesus without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, following him all the way, walking obediently in His steps."

Charles Sheldon's inspiration for the story of *In His Steps* comes from today's Second Lesson from the First Letter of Peter, in which the apostle's concern for right conduct among Christians is rooted in two important premises:

1. The eschatological hope that Christians' behavior would convince unbelievers of the rightness of their cause at the time of God's visitation;
2. That all Christian submission is undertaken not for the sake of the created authorities but for the sake of the God who created them ("*Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.*" – 2:12). All that Christians do is for God's sake.

The manner in which the faithful are to live in the midst of a society that is often hostile to them because of their faith is grounded in the story of Jesus' passion, which is a paradigm for all Christians who suffer injustice:

- "For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval." – 2:19-20.

The status of Christians is neither a matter of historical accident nor of their own decision. As those who have been given the status of *"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people"* (2:9), they are called to suffer for righteousness' sake. This is not simply bad luck or ill fate; it is their vocation as God's people. This vocation is grounded not only in God's call but in Christ's passion, which establishes the vocation for Christians in two ways:

1. Christ suffered on our behalf;
2. Christ's suffering serve as the example for the appropriate behavior of Christians.

It is *"to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps."* (2:21). The call of Jesus to discipleship was indeed a call to follow our Lord "in his steps." When Jesus encounters Simon and Andrew at the Sea of Galilee, he calls them to *"follow me, and I will make you fish for people."* (Matthew 4:19). When he encounters Matthew at his tax booth, he issues the same call: *"Follow me." And he got up and followed him.* (Matthew 9:9). In his continuing call to discipleship, Jesus also warns would-be followers of what walking "in his steps" would mean once they have decided to follow Jesus

- "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" – Matthew 16:24-26.

Walking in Jesus' steps means following our Lord who lived out his calling as predicted by the prophets that he should suffer that were *"destined for Christ and the subsequent glory."* (1:11). Peter quotes from Isaiah 53:9, one of the Suffering Servant Songs of the prophet that speaks of the one who *"committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."* (2:22). The apostle presents the Suffering Servant as one who submitted to suffering, who *"when he was abused, did not return abuse; when he suffered he did not threaten"* (2:23) – not because Jesus was a helpless victim, but because it would be through his suffering and death that he would accomplish God's Will for God's people, and therefore *"he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly."* After his resurrection, Jesus presented himself to his disciples and invited them to *"look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself"* (Luke 24:39), for it is *"by his wounds you have been healed"* (2:24; Isaiah 53:5).

As the *"Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,"* Jesus suffered for those Christians who before their conversion had themselves been straying sheep: *"For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."* (2:25). Here the apostle makes reference to Ezekiel's prophecy of God as the true shepherd in contrast to the false shepherds of Israel who have neglected and scattered God's people:

- "So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." – Ezekiel 34: 5-6, 15-16.

Jesus has become the true shepherd who fulfills this prophecy. The Christians, who before coming to faith were wandering far and wide, have now returned to him, the *"shepherd and guardian of your souls."* Though to the world they look like wandering sheep – *"aliens and exiles"* – they know that they are now at home in the shepherd's fold.

- "Christ suffered both *for* us and *before* us. He suffers for our sake and thereby provides present grace and eternal redemption, but he is also our forerunner and paradigm. Our faith in him will not deliver us from the responsibility to follow 'in his steps.' And following in his steps does not simply mean being nice or having integrity or strengthening one's devotional life. Following in his steps means following to Golgotha." – David Bartlett.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is often known as "Good Shepherd Sunday," the day in which we consider what it means to follow the one who is our Good Shepherd, the one whose leadership is always trustworthy and true. The words of Psalm 23, the most beloved of psalms, is a powerful statement of faith that the one we have chosen to follow as our shepherd is the

Lord, the God of Israel, who unlike other shepherds is always faithful to God's covenant promises. We follow this shepherd because we have confidence that God will *"lead us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake,"* that the faithful shepherd will be with us *"even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil – for you are with me."* We place our trust in the Lord as our shepherd because *"goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life";* and even when the days of my life draw to a close, this same shepherd will lead us to the home that Christ has prepared for us so that *"I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."*

It is in John's Gospel that Jesus identifies himself as the "Good Shepherd," one of the many "I am" statements in the Fourth Gospel ("I am the bread of life," "I am the true vine," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the way, and the truth, and the life"). Jesus purposely uses "good" to distinguish himself from the many bad shepherds that have led God's people, including wicked and incompetent kings (who were commonly referred to as "shepherds" in the Old Testament) whose bad leadership brought the people great harm. Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Ezekiel as the "true shepherd" who will counteract the damage of the bad shepherds in bringing blessings to God's people:

- "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among the scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." – Ezekiel 34:11-16.

The relationship that our Good Shepherd establishes with us is so loving and intimate that *"he calls them by name and leads them out ... the sheep follow him because they know his voice."* (John 10:3-4). We follow the Good Shepherd because we have confidence in his promise that *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* (10:10).

- "But you should learn to know me as your dear, faithful, saintly, kind, gracious, and comforting shepherd, toward whom your hearts should be joyful and full of trust because through me you are redeemed from all your burdens, fears, sorrows, and dangers. He will not and cannot suffer you to be lost. This I prove (he says) in that I lay down my life for the sheep." – Martin Luther.

When we hear the voice of our Good Shepherd and follow him, it changes not only the manner in which we look into our future but the way in which we live today as *"the sheep of his pasture."* Being followers of the Good Shepherd means that we have been gathered into the community of the Shepherd that is the Church, the people that place their trust and confidence in our Lord and Savior. It means that we are in a community that continues the life of the first community of disciples who after being baptized on the Day of Pentecost *"devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers."* (Acts 2:42). It means being a part of the community of disciples that follow the teachings of the Good Shepherd in sharing all things with others, so that *"day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."* (2:46). It means recognizing that in Christ *"there will be one flock, one shepherd"* (John 10:16), and therefore we have been called together by our Good Shepherd into a community that walks in his steps, that hears his voice and follows his example, that trusts that the true Shepherd will always lead us in the right path – even as that path leads us to the Cross.

- "We have been transformed into the image of Christ, and are therefore destined to be like him. He is the only 'pattern' we must follow. And because he really lives his life in us, we too can 'walk even as he walked,' and 'do as he has done,' 'love as he has loved,' 'forgive as he forgave,' 'have this mind, which was also in Christ Jesus,' and therefore we are able to follow the example he has left us, lay down our lives for the brethren as he did. It is only because he became like us that we can become like him." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *"The Cost of Discipleship."*

Later this morning, we will meet as a congregation to make decisions that will impact the life and ministry of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church. We will strive to faithfully adhere to the guidelines established in our Constitution and Bylaws so that good order is adhered to and proper procedures are followed in both our deliberations and our decisions. As we

use these governing documents as our guideline, we must also remember that the same Constitution and Bylaws calls us to follow in the steps of our Good Shepherd so that we are truly a community of faithful followers of our Lord and Savior:

- “This congregation is a worshipping, learning, witnessing and serving community of baptized persons among whom the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel... This congregation, remembering God’s mighty acts in the past, celebrating His abiding presence, and moving toward His promised fulfillment, will listen to the Word of God in Scripture and preaching, receive the Sacraments, and respond with confession, prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and with tithes and offerings.” – Article III: Nature and Mission.

The true test of whether our congregation, or any community of Christians, is following in the steps of our Good Shepherd is whether that community is guided by the simple question that transformed the life of both the fictional Maine church and the real Kansas congregation so many years ago: *“What would Jesus do?”*

- “If Jesus’ example is the example for the world to follow, it certainly must be feasible to follow it. But we need to remember this great fact. After we have asked the Spirit to tell us what Jesus would do and have received an answer to it, we are to act regardless of the results to ourselves. Is that understood?”

Our Good Shepherd calls us to follow him. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means hearing his word and responding in obedience to it. It means leaving behind our former attachments and allegiances and following the one whose steps will lead us to the Cross, but do not end there but continue on to the Resurrection and the promise of eternal life. Those who confess their faith in Jesus the Good Shepherd also declare their commitment to follow in his steps. Our ways are now his ways; our will has given way to his will.

What would Jesus do?

As God’s people, are we ready and willing to follow *in His steps*? Amen.