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## *Shepherds R Us*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 11, Year B**

The first time I went to college it was a disaster. I kid you not. To my advantage I had studied previously for a couple of years at a first rate New England boarding school. But I was still a young Black man from the South encountering New York City for the first time. And I left my smaller school—that was also more attentive and more nurturing—a year earlier than was advisable at the age of 17. And I was at Columbia University in the fall of 1968.

Some of us here today, in my generation and older, will appreciate what it meant to be at Columbia University in the year of 1968. Earlier that year, in the spring before I enrolled, university president Grayson Kirk had called in the New York City police department. The police had forcibly ended student occupation of five university buildings by arresting some 700 protestors; one of the largest mass arrests in New York City history. They had rescued the dean who had been taken hostage. One commentator says it took nearly 20 years for the university to recover in terms of the impact on student applications, on the endowment and on grants funding. (“1968 Columbia University Protests,” Wikipedia)

What were the issues back in that day? There were two: one local and the other global. Beginning with the global issue, Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS, had discovered a link between the university and the Viet Nam War. Academic researchers were involved in a military think tank that was advising the Defense Department on the conduct of that war. SDS demanded that the university resign its affiliation with the defense institute. After a peaceful anti-war demonstration inside the administration building in March of 1968 six students had been placed on probation for violating the university ban on indoor demonstrations.

At the same time, at the local level, the university had planned to build a huge gymnasium on nearby park land. It was to be built in its Morningside Heights location adjacent to Harlem, a predominantly African American and Puerto Rican neighborhood. Only a small percentage of the gym would be available to such residents. Since 1958 the university’s expansion had been displacing many of them from their homes and operating as a landlord to others. The university’s Student Afro Society, or SAS, along with city activists, resisted the plan, calling the proposed gymnasium, “Gym Crow”—spelled ‘g-y-m crow.’ The sum total of all the protests, including both the local and the global issues on campus, lasted 3 months, from March to May that year.

So later that fall, when I arrived as a freshman student, the campus was the equivalent of an evacuated war zone. A significant number of faculty had resigned over the summer. The administrators and staff that I encountered seemed distracted or dispirited, even demoralized. The predominantly white student protesters in SDS—some of whom later became members of the militant Weathermen or the Weather Underground Organization—had been rejected by African American students in the SAS. The two sides had disagreed on prioritizing the local versus the global issues; disagreed to the point of occupying opposite sides of the same building during the protests.

Then, to make matters worse, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968; just after protests began. In response the administration and the police were led to treat Black student protestors with greater restraint and deference; remarkably with less violence than white activists received. That difference led to further polarization between student activists.

I distinctly remember attending a campus rally where I encountered, for the first time, a militant looking contingent of the Black Panther Party. As a 17 year-old African American from the South I was still exploring my own identity and commitments. In the midst of such campus turmoil I felt like a nobody; invisible to my professors and equally ignored by both Black and white student factions on campus. At that time, I have come to realize, I could really have used a faculty mentor, or a student counseling advisor, or just a close friend. I lasted only three months that fall semester in 1968. By December I had dropped out of college.

As I tell the story nowadays I say that 'I disappeared in the night.' I didn't tell my parents. I just left. I showed up unannounced at a cousin's apartment in Washington D.C. where I sojourned for several months. Ever since then D.C. has felt like a sanctuary destination for me. Eventually, yielding to the persuasion of a number of concerned elders, I followed their counsel and found another college to attend. For that concern I remain grateful to this day.

Now I strongly suspect that I was not unique among freshmen students needing more support on campuses all across the U.S. in the fall of 1968. I might even say that we were like the "great crowd" that Jesus and his disciples encounter in today's gospel reading. 'As he went ashore, Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd' (Mark 6:34). It's probably not too much to say that many of us "were like sheep without a shepherd."

But let's recall here, as well, our first reading for today. Would it be too much to say that some of our elders in those days were like the shepherds described in the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah? Jeremiah can be so extreme, you know. "Woe to the shepherds," starts the reading; 'Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the sheep of my pasture,' it says in one translation. Instead of "mislead" another translation uses the word, "destroy;" destroy my sheep. But the difference in translation doesn't matter that much. Because the prophet generalizes all the shepherds in the judgmental way that we are used to from Jeremiah.

"Therefore, thus says the Lord," he declares.

<sup>2</sup> . . . the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people . . . who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away . . . [and] have not attended to them . . . I will attend to you for your evil doings . . .

<sup>3</sup> . . . I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands . . . and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

<sup>4</sup> I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:1-4)

Now, maybe we would not characterize university and government leaders 'back in my day' as engaged in "evil doings." Regardless of that judgment, I nonetheless needed some rescue shepherds; someone to have compassion on me, and "gather" me after being "scattered;" someone to 'bring me back' from feeling 'driven away;' from being "dismayed" and from 'going missing.'

But 'that's what I'm talking about!' here, isn't it? Isn't that exactly what I'm talking about here? Am I not engaged in telling you how, anticipating the rest of my story, I found such a rescue? But why belabor the matter? Do we

really need an account of the rest of my story? Already we can get to the point. Already we are recounting what the church calls, “the old, old story;” that line from the hymn, “I Love to Tell the Story.” Because it’s not just my story. It’s our shared story, isn’t it?

Maybe we should all be telling our stories here today. We could, couldn’t we? Where and when have you been in a situation where you needed such a shepherd and got such a shepherd; where you needed someone to have compassion for you and you got compassion; and someone who ‘gathered’ you after you had been “scattered;” and someone who ‘brought you back’ from feeling ‘driven away,’ back from being “dismayed” and from ‘going missing?’ All that has happened for you too, right?

So you can tell our signature story too, just as well as I can; a story about when you were provided with a shepherd or shepherds like the ones prophesied in today’s reading. But beyond all to that, here we may ‘interrupt the telling of our personal stories in order to bring out an important announcement.’ As they say: ‘We interrupt our program to bring you an important announcement’—ha-ha! Ha-ha and, ‘aha.’ Aha! That important announcement is the perennial announcement of the ‘Good News.’ It’s our gospel Good News that we are obliged to be heralds of, as disciples of Christ. It’s the Good News that we proclaim by faith, hope, and love. And it goes like this.

Whatever our personal stories may be—our personal stories of divine rescue and providential care; stories about some kind of shepherding we received, whether by events or people, whether by forces seen or unseen—whatever those individual stories may be, there is also a collective story that involves all of us telling about a rescue; telling about some kind of shepherding. There’s some kind of divine or providential story we can all share; an ‘everybody story.’

But here I invite you to join me, as my sister and fellow believers in Christ, in venturing to tell a larger story in the world today. Where people are being misled or destroyed in the world today, like sheep of a pasture, like flocks who have been scattered, and driven away, and left unattended, on account of evil doings, where is their rescue forthcoming?

Where is there a reality where anyone and everyone can truthfully claim to be regarded with compassion? From what perspective may anyone and everyone hear a credible claim that is also a divine, providential claim such as we hear in today’s prophetic text; a Godly voice that says:

<sup>3</sup> . . . I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands . . . and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

<sup>4</sup> I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:1-4)

Where can any and all who need to hear such a prophesy find a voice proclaiming such Good News in the world today? Well, church family and friends of Christ, I propose that prophesy is ours to proclaim today. I propose that we are the ones—as they say—‘we are the ones we have been waiting for;’ waiting for heralds bold enough to proclaim or continue to proclaim such gospel Good News to the world today.

Yes, we have ‘a story to tell’ and ‘a charge to keep;’ a story of unconditional love that does not show partiality; a charge to keep representing in every generation a love that sends out rescuers and concerned people who will shepherd others with compassion and commitment.

Now to fortify us for that awesome commission I have both a challenge to highlight and some encouragement to offer. Here’s the challenge. Today’s gospel begins with those first disciples—Jesus’ chosen apostles, gathering around him and, we can imagine excitedly, telling him “all that they had done and taught.” But Jesus

—knowing full well the rigors of the ministry that he was calling them to carry out—Jesus responded:

‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

<sup>32</sup>And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

<sup>33</sup>Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. (Mark 6:31-33.)

Here we can also imagine the disciples’ dismay and exhaustion, as they confronted the challenge before them of ministering to so many needy people. But by the end of today’s gospel reading we find them with Jesus again, as he models what it takes to be the kind of shepherd that they too are called to be.

When they had crossed over . . . [and] got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,

<sup>55</sup>and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

<sup>56</sup>And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. (Mark 6:54-56)

Now precisely here I’m reminded of that classic exhortation from the Jewish book of rabbinic laws and wisdom sayings, the Mishnah:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief . . . You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it" ("*Pirkei Avot*" 2:16).

‘Do not be daunted,’ ha! Easy to say, yes? So finally, how about some measure of encouragement alongside all the words we hear today that are intended to motivate us. If you’re a Jesus’ follower like me, you need more encouragement to keep up with the rigors of the kind of ministry that Jesus calls us to be; as he calls us to be shepherds like him.

I can think of nothing better to encourage us than Christina Rossetti’s classic poem called, “Uphill.” You may have heard it before; it’s so celebrated for balancing both hard work and restoration from hard work. It’s composed of four verses; each one featuring two voices. One voice is that of a traveler who asks a series of questions about a journey uphill. ‘Does it wind up-hill all the way?’ the questions begin. Then we here a voice that answers truthfully, realistically and credibly: ‘Yes, it winds up-hill all the way,’ that second voice answers. Listen now to the entire poem (emphasis added).

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?

**Yes, to the very end.**

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

**From morn to night, my friend.**

But is there for the night a resting-place?

A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

**You cannot miss that inn.**

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?  
Those who have gone before.  
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?  
**They will not keep you standing at that door.**

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?  
**Of labour you shall find the sum.**  
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
**Yea, beds for all who come.**

Thus we have a Guide who admits, “Of labour you shall find the sum.” But He also promises that there are “beds for all who come.” Therefore consider, as you reflect on all that you hear in this place today; consider that those of us assembled here are also summoned to be travelers embarked on such a journey involving lifelong commitments. Yes, at baptism we too are summoned; summoned to be ‘winding up-hill all the way.’ We too are ‘journeying the whole long day,’ and are charged to ‘find labors full sum.’

But as the poet says, to supplement the prophet, we are also promised waystations along the journey; times of restoration by a Guide who, often enough, invites us to ‘Come away and rest a while’ (cf. Mark 6:31).

‘Now to the One who is able to keep us from falling, and to make us stand without fault in the presence of the divine glory with rejoicing, <sup>25</sup>to that One be the glory . . . before all time, and now and forever. Amen.’ (Jude 24-25 paraphrased).

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#### For the Curious

In addition to a detailed Wikipedia entry titled , “1968 Columbia University protests,” see last spring’s New York Times article, “What Columbia Should Have Learned From the Protests of 1968” (Ginia Bellafante, April 25, 2024; [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)), and the related National Public Radio article, “In Columbia University’s protests of 1968 and 2024, what’s similar — and different” (Bill Chappell, April 26, 2024; [npr.org](https://www.npr.org)).