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Savior, Like a Penguin Lead Us

John 10:11-18

I have been here with you as Gap Pastor for about 5 months now, and I've made some observations. First and foremost, you are a group of genuine people. You are quite sensitive – each of you carries not only the burdens and heaviness of the concerns in your own household, but you are aware of and show compassion for the hardships of those outside your immediate circle. Because you have this level of concern for others, you have a need and appreciation for community – the kind of community that shares your load and cares for you. I also notice that you at First Mennonite are not congregants who follow a leader, *any* leader, like sheep, without question or conversation. This is a good and commendable thing! You respect leadership, but not blindly.

When you begin the process of a pastoral search, you will not be the kind of group that will be seeking a shepherd-leader/ a settled pastor with a rod and staff – a rod to fend off predators and a staff to snag you out of danger or keep you “in line” with the program. (okay, maybe a few of you might need to be kept in line) Rather than a flock of sheep led to the green pastures, in my assessment, I actually think you are more like a group of Emperor Penguins!

If you are not familiar with the movie *The March of the Penguins* it is a must-see. It is a remarkable film, a documentary, a love story, a family flick, an adventure and a comedy. It is the story of year in the life of a colony of Emperor Penguins who face countless obstacles to survival and procreation of the species. The penguins live in an egalitarian society. There is not one leader, like the king of a lion pride, or the alpha dog in a pack. For example, when they are walking from the feeding area to the breeding grounds where the ice is thicker, one penguin starts out in front. After a few days, the leader may lose the scent or sight or sound of the

way to go, and another penguin steps forward to lead the waddle. (It's true! A colony of penguins on land is called a waddle of penguins.)

There are many challenges they face from the time of conception to laying the egg, searching for food and staying alive in the cold that can reach 80 degrees below zero. There are three of those challenges I want to mention that resonate with who we are as a church family. First, the responsibility for raising the chicks is shared by the females and males. The males keep one egg balanced on top of their feet, warming them under a flap of skin. Second, when the females are gone to find food under the thinner ice, the males huddle together for warmth. Again, there is no one bird in charge. Instead, they all gather in a circular mob, bracing against the cold wind. The ones who stand in the colder, outer ring, rotate after a while to stand in the center of the colony where it is warmest. No one is left out or relegated to the outer ring for the entire winter. There is mutual care. Third, when the females come back to the breeding ground to see how their mates and chicks are, they find each other by sound. Each penguin calls out to the other. Among thousands of birds, the mates find each other by simply listening for the other's voice. They know the voice of the beloved, just as a children know their parents' voices calling out in the supermarket.

You and I also know each other's voices, and our strengths and weaknesses, and our inflections. We communicate in very intimate ways within the congregation. We not only know one voice, we know many voices – voices of our fellow followers and leaders. When our mission activities reach further outward, we come to know other voices – voices of those who are underemployed, hungry, and in need of water or shelter. We learn to listen for the voices of hidden figures, and discerning new leaders to give our attention to.

Some of you here may be leaders in the community. You lead organizations as administrators, employees and volunteers; you speak and people listen; you make a plan, and others follow it. Church may be the only place where you do not have to lead. This is a place where you can choose to follow the lead of someone else and be the participant in an activity or project, without being in charge.

Some of you here may not have leadership roles in the broader community. You do your work successfully, but may not have a voice or a say in how things are run in your work or volunteer space. The gifts of management you have may not be valued in your setting. Church may be the place where you can be a leader, where your gifts of compassion, organization, teaching and planning can be utilized for the good of the entire congregation. This is a place where you can choose to be in charge, and to experience people of faith following your voice.

As leaders and followers in our day to day lives, we have the freedom to choose our roles at church. Like the Emperor Penguins, we take turns leading and following. We nurture, teach, comfort, warm and guide one another between barren land and the seas rich with food. We are egalitarian, democratic, classless, equal and self-governing. We are not sheep, led by the voice of a single shepherd, or even a single pastor; we share the responsibilities of governance and direction, and we're good at it.

Where does this leave us in terms of the Scripture readings for today? According to the gospel of John, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd." Oops! Is there a place in our penguin lives for a good shepherd? If Jesus is our highest example of how to live a good life, we must look carefully at his actions. He was the great equalizer, eating and drinking with people of ill repute. He said things like, "who is my mother and who are my brothers?" "I no longer call you servants but

friends.” “I am gathering sheep not of this fold.” We emulate his ability to engage others as equals, more like an emperor penguin than a shepherd.

We cannot, however, completely avoid his references to shepherding. He used this image not only because he was addressing people from an agrarian society, but because he grew up with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, just as we have. He heard, and perhaps memorized, Psalm 23. “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” He knew the passage from Isaiah: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

Jesus was a follower. He prayed the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, praying that his Lord, his Abba, the God he called Daddy, would be his guide and protection through his life. He followed. In order to be the leader that he was, he actually had to be a follower. Jesus had to follow a shepherd – the voice of God – in order to find his way to the still waters, away from the valley of the shadow of death, and into the banquet where even enemies are gathered together in peace. Jesus spent his life learning the Scriptures and listening to God’s word through every means possible, so that he could recognize God’s voice when he needed it the most. And then when he was called upon, he became the shepherd leading others.

In order for us to be effective leaders, we, too must be able to identify who it is we are following. If we set ourselves or our own voices as the highest goal or aim, we will wander off like lost sheep. We come to church to listen and taste and see what God wants to provide for us, so that when we are out and about in the rest of our lives, we, too, can hear the shepherd’s voice when we need it the most.

You and I can rightly uphold the image of ourselves as penguins, sharing leadership and living interdependently. We can also uphold the image of ourselves as sheep, following and being dependent. We see in the life of Jesus that there is

strength in following. There is clarity in hearing and abiding by the voice that we hear from God. We learn that depending on the guidance of God's voice is a gift, not a sign of weakness. We are created to lean on each other individually, and to lean on God as a people. You and I need the assurance and direction of a solid leader in front, **and** alongside **and** bringing up the rear. Whether we initially identify with it or not, you and I need the leader described in Psalm 23 and in the gospel of John.

We the penguins need a shepherd, and we the sheep need each other.

Amen.

John 10:11-18

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away--and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

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.

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. **I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

**Fun facts to know and share: The Falkland islands have a tiny population of just 3,200 citizens, 3,400 cattle and 500 horses. They also have half a million sheep and over a million penguins!**