

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Shepherding the Flock of God”  
Psalm 68:1-10  
I Peter 5:1-11**

**Seventh Sunday of Easter  
May 28, 2017**

**Psalm 68:1-10**

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. A Song.

God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him! As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away; as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God! But the righteous shall be glad; they shall exult before God; they shall be jubilant with joy!

Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the Lord; exult before him! Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel. Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad; you restored your inheritance as it languished; your flock found a dwelling in it; in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.

**I Peter 5:1-11**

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

**“Shepherding the Flock of God”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday was a big day in the life of this church. At our regular worship we installed four elders to the Session. This is big news! While our Session may not be the board of trustees for a Fortune 500 company or the council of some hot-shot city, it is nevertheless an important and vital board of this congregation. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the Presbyterian system of

governance, let me give you a crash course. A session is the council that governs a particular church. Every church has a session. And every session meets fairly regularly. At one of the churches I worked with in North Carolina, they had six people worshipping on Sunday mornings, those six people were the session. The Presbytery is the council made up of sessions and pastors, and it oversees the churches within its borders. Presbyteries can be as small as Metro Philadelphia or as large as the entire state of Wyoming. Also, Alaska and Washington are in the same Presbytery. Think about that the next time a Presbytery meeting is scheduled in Blacksburg. The General Assembly is the council made up presbyteries and oversees the church at the national level.

So why is the installation of elders a big deal? It's not because your pastor is some super-Presbyterian; I'm more a Calvinist than a Presbyterian. It's a big deal because the Session is a critical aspect to ministry. Now by no means is the Session the exclusive body for church ministry, but neither is the Session just another committee. The Session helps to organize and maintain the life and work of the church; this is why it is an important task. The installation of our elders is just as important and meaningful as my installation later that same day. You and I are ministers of God, we are his heralds and disciples of Jesus Christ. Just as there are many ministers, each of us ministers differently but towards the same ministry. My job as minister is to preach the Gospel, administer the Sacraments, and tend the flock. Your job as ministers are to witness to the Gospel, share in the Sacraments, and help guide the flock.

I want to sit a while on this idea of shepherding the flock. Probably for most of us, the imagery of shepherding is just that, an image. Maybe one or two of you have been on a sheep farm, but I have not. From what I've been able to glean, sheep have a reputation of easily getting lost. Within the group, an individual sheep is able to stay safe and thus not get taken by wolves. But when an individual sheep slips away from the herd, it becomes an easy target for predators or is easily lost in deep crevices or dark woods. Unfortunately, sheep also have the reputation of being sheepish, meaning they are weak, easily distracted, and susceptible to a state known as groupthink. In fact, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary recently added a new word to the English lexicon. "Sheeple" is a compound word of sheep-people, and it is used negatively to describe those who tend to follow the majority opinion and show little resistance to the *status quo*. Sheeple.

I do not think the Apostle Peter had sheeple in mind when he penned the fifth chapter of his Epistle. The Apostle begins by exhorting the elders of the church. He's talking to me. He's talking to the Session. He's talking to each of us who witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter, who saw firsthand the suffering and persecution of Jesus, who thrice denied our Lord, was, during one of the post-resurrection visits, thrice commanded to feed Jesus' sheep. Jesus instructed Peter to feed his sheep; to guide, protect, and love the people of God. In this way, Peter became a shepherd of people. If you remember, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he found Peter and his brother Andrew casting their nets in the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus asked them to follow him and he would make them fishers of men. From that time on, Peter joined Jesus and the other disciples in a new profession of fishing for people. After the resurrection, Jesus gives to Peter another profession. Not only is he to be a fisher of men, but also a shepherd to the flock of Christ.

Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd. He gave himself that title when, in John 10:14-15 he said, "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.” Christ is the head of the church, he is our foundation, our cornerstone, and our keystone. The church exists because of Christ and for Christ. There is no other Good Shepherd, there is no other head of the church. But Christ is not here on earth, he sits at the right hand of God the Father. While Christ is the Good Shepherd, the earthly church has need of undershepherds. I am an undershepherd. The elders are undershepherds. We minister because of Christ and for Christ. And this is a weighty matter. This call carries with it a heavy responsibility, which is why installations are a big deal.

This is why Peter says to his elders to exercise oversight “willingly” and “not for shameful gain.” I am not in this for the money or the prestige. I imagine most of you are not in this for the money or the prestige either. Believe me, there are some pastors and elders out there who hold these positions for the large paycheck or for the status in their community. Being leaders of the church for shameful gain is selfish, and goes against the command of Christ to witness through servant leadership. Being an elder of the church means we must exhibit humility and service to our fellow sheep *and* for those who live outside the fold. Peter also includes, “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” God did not raise up elders in order for them to lord over others as a despot. You can imagine the original readers of Peter’s Letter. There were likely Christians who held influence over others. Maybe they were local politicians, wealthy merchants, renowned artisans. Sometimes these prominent figures would make their way into the leadership of the church by becoming elders. The temptation can arise to use their influence from the secular world to domineer over others. Peter says this is not the role of the elder. Elders of the church are to walk alongside the laypeople. That was the model of Jesus Christ. To walk *with* people instead of leading ahead of people, this is the best example to the flock.

And remember, we are a flock. Another reason why the sheep imagery is so important for the early Christians is because we are to model a communal mentality. The sheep of a fold are gathered together and guided by their shepherd. We, too, gather as the fold of the church and we are lead by our undershepherds to the glory of the Good Shepherd. This is something to keep in mind. Everything we do must be to the glory and testimony of the Jesus Christ. That’s the litmus test to gauge elders and flocks. As one of your undershepherds, I want you to hold me accountable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The things I say up here, the things our elders do in and around the church, these things are to be to the glory and honor of God. And as sheep of this pasture, you, too, are charged to live to glorify our risen Savior. Let us hold each other accountable to the Gospel.

Now, after exhorting the younger members of the church to respect the elders, Peter emphasizes the need to clothe ourselves “with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’” Being humble is hard. It’s hard because humility is more than just bowing your head in silence. Peter says that holy humility means we cast all our anxieties on God. That’s hard sometimes. Sometimes it’s easier, and more comfortable, to hold onto our anxieties. We’d rather be anxious and know we’re anxious than to cast those worries on God and not know what may happen. My friends, that’s a sign of a lack of faith. Sheep trust their shepherd fully. Without a shepherd, the sheep scatter and they get lost. Without a shepherd, the sheep are vulnerable to attack. Sheep place their trust fully in the hands of the shepherd, because they know the shepherd has only the best of intentions for the flock. Our Good Shepherd wants you to receive eternal salvation and to join him in eternal glory. In the Good Shepherd we place our trust because we have through faith

the knowledge that while this world may pass away, that while we may experience death in this place, we have a sure and certain hope that death does not win! That sin no longer has a claim on our lives! It's hard to release our anxieties to God when everything seems to be going downhill. You can release them, because we have a God, a Good Shepherd, who is always on our side and will never leave us.

In the same breath, Peter urges us to be watchful. He says, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." In ancient times more so than today, shepherds had to be extra vigilant because predators would seek out their sheep. You can imagine how irresistible a group of sheep looks to a hungry lion or a pack of wolves. All this plump mutton gathered in one place looks just like a buffet. A good shepherd knows how to look for signs of predators and knows how to attack or ward them off. King David, in his youth, was known for his skill in defending his father's sheep with the slingshot. Elders of the church are to be especially vigilant for our enemy, but in truth it is the personal responsibility of every Christian to be on the lookout for signs of the devil. Satan seeks to destroy the church, he's looking for ways to rend the flock of God asunder and prey on the souls of God's beloved creation.

Unfortunately, the tools of the devil are vast and varied. He uses gossip and hypocrisy to create divisions among the people of God. He instills hatred and prejudice to bring people to fighting and discord. But the enemy isn't just trying to tear us apart from one another, he's also trying to tear us apart from ourselves, from our true identity as children of God. Anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, despair, and loneliness, do you think God made us this way? Of course not! Those feelings, those senses, they are not part of God's plan; they are tools of the devil and his handiwork strives to separate us from the love of God. My friends, let me tell you right now, God loves you. God loves you. God knows the pain you may be suffering. God knows the anguish, the grief, and the fear. And God is calling you to wade through. But you're not alone. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, why? Because the Good Shepherd's rod and his staff guide you. Because you have elders here, fellow members of the flock, who'll walk alongside you. My beloved, Peter reminds us, I remind you, while you may suffer a little while, "the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

Let us pray. Good Shepherd, you charge us, your body in this world, the sheep of your pasture, to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is a great responsibility, but we know you will help us in this rule. You help us by establishing in your church elders to lead her. Here in this time and place, you guide us, the Altavista Presbyterian Church, by our teaching and ruling elders. You also call each of us, as members of your flock, to humility before God and one another. In our regeneration you call us to be vigilant against the machinations of the devil, who desires nothing more but to see your fold desolated and devoured. O Holy Ghost, we call upon you to be with us through times of trial. Be with us as we seek to follow God's will. Remind us of our salvation; that while all may be lost in this lifetime, nothing, in this world or the next, can separate us from the love of God. To this the church says, amen.