

“The Good Shepherd”

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John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

12 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. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

16 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.

17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 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.”

I AM

Jesus said, “*I am* the good shepherd.”

In John’s gospel, we have quite a few “I am” statements attributed to Jesus. That’s an important phrase.

And it has its roots in the Old Testament.

You’ll remember that when Moses asked to know God’s name at the burning bush,

the reply was: “I am who I am.” Jesus is echoing that same “I am” in our lesson for today.

In John's gospel the mission and ministry of Jesus is described as God's mission and ministry.

There is no daylight between the work of Jesus and the work of His Father.

John tells us in the very beginning.

Jesus is the Word made flesh.

He is the human revelation of the Divine.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

So, what does that way look like?

What is the Divine look like in "down to earth terms"?

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Today's lesson gives us some insight into that.

The down to earth description of Divine grace is expressed in terms of a shepherd caring for his sheep.

God is revealed in Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

One of the most beloved passages in the Old Testament is the 23rd Psalm. Many of you have it memorized.

"The Lord is my shepherd."

And we can see how Jesus' mission dovetails very nicely into this famous shepherd psalm.

The Lord's actions in that Psalm are mirrored by the actions of Jesus during his ministry.

For example, when the people need something to eat, when they "want" in the wilderness,

He supplies what the people need when he feeds the 5000.

He leads his disciples beside still waters

when he stills the storm.

And even though his disciples travel through the valley of the shadow of death,

they will fear no evil because the risen Christ appears to them and restores their soul.

I think it would be an interesting exercise to read the 23rd Psalm and then find various instances in the New Testament where Jesus proves to be the Good Shepherd by his actions and the message of hope that he brings.

THE HIRED HAND

There's another Old Testament passage that also talks about God as a Shepherd.

In Ezekiel (34:11-16) the Lord is described as the one who seeks the lost and scattered sheep of Israel.

God will bring them back home, and bind up their wounds.

But, that Ezekiel passage also closes with a word of warning (16).

Those leaders who did not display compassion and righteousness will be judged.

The fat and sassy will be fed justice.

To put it another way:

The Lord will not only comfort the afflicted.

He will also afflict the comfortable.

We also see that strain of thought in our lesson for today.

The Good Shepherd is contrasted with the "hired hand".

The hired hand doesn't own the sheep and doesn't really have their best interests at heart.

He's just in it for the money.

When the wolf is at the door, the hired hand runs away, and the sheep are scattered.

So, with whom do we identify in this story?

Are we like Jesus the Good Shepherd?

Are we like the hired hands who are just in it for the money and run away at the first sign of trouble?

Like most stories in the Bible we could probably enter the text at various points.

Sometimes, by the grace of God, we do show compassion like Jesus. Sometimes we are like the hired hands, self centered and lacking courage.

WE ARE SHEEP

But, I would suggest that most of the time we're like the sheep. We are weak and vulnerable.

We are in constant danger from the wolves of the world, leaders who sometimes do not have our best interests at heart.

We might not like to think of ourselves as sheep. We'd like to think that we are smarter than that. We'd like to think that we have it all together.

But, I'm afraid that's just not true. We are often at the mercy of forces that are beyond our control.

And yet, there's good news in this passage. We may be weak and vulnerable like sheep.

But, we have a Good Shepherd.

SHEEP WANT TO BE LED

Sheep have one really important quality that helps them survive. Sheep know the voice of the shepherd, and they want to be led.

Barbara Brown Taylor in a sermon on this passage said that she actually had an acquaintance who grew up on a sheep farm. And he contended that contrary to popular belief, sheep are not dumb.

This was a rumor started by cattle ranchers because sheep don't act like cows.

Cows are herded from the rear with shouts and prods from the cowboy.

But, that doesn't work with sheep.

If you stand behind sheep and make noises they just run behind you.
Sheep actually prefer to be led.

Cows can be pushed.
Sheep must be led.

Sheep will not go anywhere that their shepherd does not go first.
The shepherd leads the way,
showing the sheep that everything is all right.

Barbara's friend said,
"Sheep seem to consider their shepherds part of the family,
and the relationship that grows up between them is quite exclusive.
They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to."

LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF THE SHEPHERD

The key to this, according to our passage, is the voice of the shepherd.
Jesus the Good Shepherd said,

"I know my own, and my own know me."

It is voice of the Shepherd that brings us together and keeps us safe.

Sheep are smart enough to listen only to the shepherd.

We, on the other hand,
... not always so smart.

Sometimes we listen to other voices.
And that can get us into trouble.

How can we listen only to the voice of the Shepherd
when there are so many other voices vying for our attention?

A COMMUNITY THAT LISTENS TOGETHER

Jesus knew that his disciples would struggle with those other voices.
And so he created a community of faith whose sole purpose was
to come together and listen to the voice of the Shepherd.

Jesus asked his first disciples to go into the whole world and make disciples.

They were to teach others about Jesus' message of love and grace in word and deed.

They were to create communities that would come together and listen to the voice of Jesus.

The early church had no Bible.

Instead, they gathered early in the morning before they went to work and listened to someone read the Hebrew Scriptures and then speak about Jesus.

The only way to listen to Jesus was to meet him through the witness of those who had gone before. I wonder if, in a way, that was an advantage.

Their teachings about Jesus profoundly shaped that community.

When we read about the formation of the early church in the book of Acts, we find that listening to the voice of Jesus together became a way of life.

They got together every day and not only listened to the words of Scripture and the words of Jesus; they also ate together and shared what they had with each other. In a world where everyone lived on the edge, the community of faith became a shelter from the storm.

And people were attracted to this community because they did more than talk about Jesus; they heard his voice and followed him.

Today we have the words of Jesus neatly summarized in four gospels and elaborated in the Acts of the Apostles and the teachings of Paul and other early Christian writers.

KNOWING IS NOT ENOUGH

Anyone can know the words of Jesus.

The Bible is still a best seller.

It's everywhere.

But, sometimes we forget that there's a difference between knowing the words

and hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Some are under the illusion that they can be a solitary Christian, that they can just read the Bible at home and act accordingly.

That's not true.

Sheep don't live very long apart from the flock.

The first thing a wolf will do is try and separate a vulnerable sheep from the flock.

That will inevitably lead to the death of the sheep.

If we do not have a strong connection with the community of faith, the voice of the Good Shepherd will grow increasingly dim.

And we may find ourselves listening to other voices that want to do us harm.

To hear the voice of Jesus we must come together as his flock.

The Good Shepherd has brought us together for our own protection and nurture.

THE GREAT ENDS OF THE CHURCH

In our Book of Order we have what we call the "Great Ends of the Church".

This is a list of six things (based on the Bible) that we are called to do as a church.

In my opinion, we don't need to waste our time writing mission statements.

We need to study and put into practice the Great Ends of the Church.

The six Great Ends of the Church are:

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- the maintenance of divine worship;
- the preservation of the truth
- the promotion of social righteousness;
- the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World

To put it another way,
 We come together each week to worship God,
 hear God's truth as proclaimed in his Word,
 and then we go out into the world to put it into practice.

We listen to the voice of the Shepherd
 so that we don't get lost.
 And we listen to the voice of the Shepherd
 so that we can help other lost sheep (like us) hear the Divine call.

If you haven't had a chance to look at and think about the Great Ends of the Church,
 I suggest you do that this week.

You don't even need a Book of Order.
 Just Google it!

We all need to be on the same page when it comes to our purpose as a community of faith.
 And if we're not, then we'll get lost down a lot of unhelpful side roads.

Now you have your homework assignment for this week.
 There will be a quiz!

LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE

So the Good Shepherd calls the flock together and leads them.
 But, there's one more thing that characterizes the Good Shepherd.

According to our passage,
 the Good Shepherd even lays down his life for the sheep.

This is where the Good Shepherd is different from the ordinary shepherd.

The shepherd might value the sheep because they are livestock.
 They are expensive.
 The shepherd has a lot of money tied up in his sheep.

But, though the shepherd may assume a certain amount of risk in protecting his investment,

sheep are sheep.

Sometimes you just have to let one go.
Going after lost sheep might not be worth the risk.

In contrast, the Good Shepherd isn't willing to let even one sheep go astray.

The Good Shepherd is even willing to lay down his life for the sake of his sheep.

This, of course, refers to the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross.

We have to mix metaphors at this point,
but the Good Shepherd loves the sheep so much that he becomes one of them,
and He dies for them.

He becomes the sacrificial lamb of God.

In John's gospel, when John the Baptist sees Jesus, he points to him and says,
"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29)

FORGIVENESS AND OTHER SHEEP

If you had to pick one message that is the essence of what Jesus taught, it is the message of forgiveness.

The thing that brings God's flock together more than anything else is this message.

The Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep,
and on the cross he pronounced a word of forgiveness to anyone who would listen.

He even spoke a word of forgiveness to the enemies who crucified him.

So, this means that the Good Shepherd speaks not only to those who identify themselves as members of his flock. The Good Shepherd speaks to and welcomes others who are outside the community of faith.

In verse 16 we read,

“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.”

The Good Shepherd not only cares for the sheep;
He also gathers the flock.

Anyone who believes in the grace of God as revealed in Jesus, is welcomed into the community of faith.

This means the door is wide open to sinners and those rejected by society.

In the Bible we read about Jesus healing, forgiving, and welcoming quite the rogues gallery:
Samaritans, tax collectors, men and women of ill repute, lepers ... you name it.

This was the thing that shocked the political and religious leaders.

The Good Shepherd not only preached a word of grace to his own people;
He also preached a word of grace to those on the other side of the border.

He tore down walls instead of building them.

If we make any mistakes when it comes to hearing the voice of Jesus,
(and heaven knows we will make many mistakes)
I hope we err on the side of grace.

I hope people accuse us of being too forgiving
and too open to accepting people that the world rejects.

Because that's how they criticized Jesus.

He ate with sinners and tax collectors.
He was always on the lookout for that lost sheep who could be brought back into the fold.

I wonder if the voice of Jesus might be asking us to gather the flock, to open ourselves up to other sheep that are not of this fold?

INTIMACY AND SECURITY

Most of us don't know a whole lot about shepherds and sheep.

But, this Good Shepherd analogy still speaks in a powerful way about two things that all of us need desperately:

friendship and security.

We need to be a part of a community where we are known by name.

We need to hear a voice that we can trust.

We need a word of grace that comes with a human touch.

We need a place where we can reveal our true feelings without fear of being judged and rejected.

We need a place where we are accepted for who we are.

And this need is especially acute in the modern world.

In our world relationships have become more virtual than real, and all news seems to be fake news.

But, the Good Shepherd offers Good News, and meaningful face to face relationships lived out in the context of grace.

Jesus didn't exclude people based on the standards of the day.

Jesus accepted people as they were and brought them hope.

That's still true.

Jesus still gathers the flock.

He reaches out to other sheep.

And we get to help.

We get to welcome other sheep into the fold.

And proclaim a Word of truth and grace.

Amen.