

## *I Am Who the Good Shepherd*

John 10: 1-18



[Pastor Mark walks out with lamb in his arms.] "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me..." Psalm 23

"[The Lord] tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms; and carries them close to his heart..." Isaiah 40: 11

What a tender image: God as our shepherd. We find it throughout the Bible... God and his appointed leaders, as shepherds of their people. Listen to this description of King David's call:

"[God] chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people..." Psalm 78: 70-71

God expected his leaders to care tenderly for His people. So when you read these scathing words from the prophet Ezekiel, you know that God was not happy!

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel ... Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ... because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered ... because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves....I will rescue my flock from their mouths...I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...

This morning, Jesus fulfills that promise. John 10: 1-18

Let me start by asking this: why did Jesus preach this sermon here? What was the context? When we look at the gospel, we see chapters and verses... but they were added much later. When John wrote his gospel this shepherd sermon fell immediately after what story? Yes, the healing of the blind man. That story ends with the man getting booted out of the synagogue because he testified for Jesus.

Then comes 10:1: "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber." Who are these thieves and robbers? The Pharisees! Jesus is so angry with the way they treated the ex-blind man that he preaches a sermon to make his scathing point. And it is this: the people who are supposed to care for the sheep of Israel have become the false shepherds like Ezekiel warned about. Thieves and robbers who feast upon the very flock they are called to protect. In this context, Jesus teaches what a true shepherd is like.

Did you notice two different I Am statements? What? "I Am the Gate." And I "Am the Good Shepherd." So which is it? Gate or Good Shepherd? Well, if you understand first century sheep herding, you will see how he can be both.

Jesus makes several claims for himself. First, The Good Shepherd gives access to the sheep. In the time of Jesus, the sheep pen looked like this. It was a stone wall with an opening and no gate. At the end of the day, as various shepherds returned with their flocks, one shepherd served as gatekeeper. He watched as the sheep walked through the opening into the pen. Nothing got past him that wasn't supposed to. And after they were in, this is what he did. He literally laid down his body in front of the opening and slept there. He became the gate. No one got in or out without his permission.

What is Jesus saying here? The same thing he says throughout John's gospel. The same thing he told Nicodemus: God loved this world—loved you—so much, that He sent his Son to provide a way for you into his family. There is nothing for you to do to earn this. Nothing you can do. God has done it. All you need do is accept this incredible gift and walk through the door called Jesus.

But right here—at this point of incredible grace—is a reason so many in our culture find evangelicals offensive: because we take Jesus seriously when he claims to be, not one of many doors to God, but **the** door to God. In our day when anything goes and everyone's beliefs are valid, as long as they believe something, this is not a popular message. Yet it is the most important issue to which your elders and pastors—the Lord's under-shepherds—are unwaveringly committed: Jesus Christ alone is **the** Door of access into the Father's Kingdom.

Here is a second claim Jesus makes: The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The Gate wasn't just for keeping sheep in; it was for keeping bad guys out... thieves, robbers, wolves. And when the bad guys tried to come in over the

wall, it was the Good Shepherd who would risk his life to protect the sheep. Not the hired hand. "He cares nothing for the sheep," as Jesus said. But the Good Shepherd was willing to lay down his life for his flock.



But think about that for a moment. Even if a shepherd was willing to risk his life to protect the sheep, why did he do so? Sheep weren't raised as pets. They were raised to eat or to sacrifice. When a shepherd risked his life to save theirs, it was only to delay the inevitable, so that he could take their life at a time and for a purpose that suited him. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd does this remarkable, unthinkable thing: he dies in the place of his sheep. He dies so that his sheep won't have to. He is sacrificed so that his sheep aren't sacrificed.

Of course, this hadn't yet happened, but John is looking ahead to the cross. When Jesus, the perfect, sinless lamb of God—who is also the Good Shepherd—will substitute his life for his sheep. This doctrine, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus, is one the most remarkable things about our faith. That the Creator God would, as Paul put it, take on human form, humble himself and become obedient unto death on a cross so that he might save his beloved flock... it is **the** astounding act of grace in all of human history. Did you know that you were that loved?

The Good Shepherd gives access to his sheep, he lays down his life for his sheep and thirdly, The Good Shepherd offers abundant life to his sheep. John 10: 10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Remember, this comes on the heels of the Pharisees' horrible treatment of the ex-blind man. Jesus uses this parable-sermon to expose the religious leaders who are such awful shepherds.

These bad shepherds clung to their power, abused their authority, frightened and mistreated their people. They lay such a heavy load of law and ritual upon people's backs—a load that they, themselves, could not carry—that they sucked the joy right out of life. Their faith had become largely about things forbidden. About how life should be limited, restrained, muted. Then comes Jesus who shouts in his sheep sermon—with all the Pharisees listening in—"I came that my sheep might have abundant life. I am the shepherd that makes my sheep lie down in green pastures, leads them beside still waters, restores their soul!"

Our friend Stuart McAllister said this to our team this week: "We Christians must be better known as life-givers! Our churches must be known mostly, not for what we stand against, but for the life we stand for. We obey God and live his way, not because we want to squelch life, but because God's way is real life." I'm not sure we Christians always believe that. And I'm sure the world doesn't believe that about us, but it's true. The Thief—the Devil—and all his cronies are the ones who want to kill, steal and destroy. The Pharisees stole the ex-blind man's reputation

when they publicly scandalized him. They killed his community when they kicked him out of the synagogue. They destroyed his parents' security when they threatened them. It was Jesus who gave him sight, Jesus who gave new life, Jesus who went searching for the lost-sheep blind man when the religious wolves had ravaged him and chased him away.

One of my hopes, especially in this Year of Jubilee is that we will have the opportunity to declare to our community, in a number of ways, that we are here to offer life—abundant life—to all who long for more than this world has to give.

The Good Shepherd gives access, lays down his life, offers abundant life... and finally, the Good Shepherd calls his sheep to follow him. Did you notice how many times "voice" is mentioned? 27: "The sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me." Sheep have deservedly earned the reputation of being among the stupidest of God's creatures. It is no great honor, frankly, for us to be called sheep. But the one thing sheep do well, besides, nibbling, is this: they learn and follow their shepherd's voice. Even today, you can see it in the Middle East. Many shepherds will gather their sheep in one area and, in the morning, station themselves around the outside of the sheep pen and begin to call. The sheep will hear their shepherd's voice, sort themselves, and go right to him.

There is a wonderful comfort here. If we are in Jesus' flock, he knows us. Who doesn't want to be known by the Lord? But if we really belong to him, we know his voice. And when we hear it, what do we do? Follow him! We trust him and do what he tells us to do. In my e-bulletin this week, I wrote about the difference between beliefs and values. We do what we value, not what we believe. Christians say that we believe the Bible is the word of God but don't read it. We say that we believe in prayer but don't go to prayer meetings. We say we believe in evangelism but never invite anyone to church. We say that all we possess belongs to the Lord but don't tithe. In other words, our convictions never become our affections. Yet one of the marks of Jesus' sheep is that when we hear his voice, we follow him. As Luke put it, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not do what I say?"

How do we hear the voice of Jesus? We hear it through the reading of his Word. We hear it in community... that's why LifeGroups are essential. We hear it when the Word is properly preached. One of our convictions as Reformed Christians is that, if preachers faithfully exalt Jesus, the preached word becomes God's voice to us. Obviously, we need to be careful that no pastor manipulates the flock. But if God ordains a preacher to speak with "his voice" on Sunday morning, and if when you hold it up against God's word you can say, "Yes, that is a faithful revelation of Jesus," then the Holy Spirit can actually anoint the meager words of a saved-sinner-preacher and turn them into the voice of the Good Shepherd to all of us.

This idea is loathsome to Americans, by the way, because we really don't want to place ourselves under anyone's authority... even someone who has been called

and ordained to that purpose. We want to be our own authority. And yet, if we believe that Jesus still speaks and if we belong to him, then when we hear his voice our only response can be, "Where must I go to follow where Jesus is leading?"

A guide was teaching this to a group of tourists on a bus in Israel. About how sheep don't need to be herded because they know and follow their shepherd's voice. But as he spoke, he noticed that the tourists were distracted. He turned to see an amazing sight. A man by the side of the road was chasing a flock of sheep. He was throwing rocks at them, hitting them with sticks and siccing his dog on them. The guide was so shocked, he ordered the bus stopped and got out to talk to the man. "I'm amazed to see you treat the sheep this way. I have never seen a shepherd behave in this manner. "Shepherd?" the man snorted. "I'm not the shepherd. I'm the butcher." [Lynn Anderson, *They Smell Like Sheep*. Enjoy.]

There are a lot of butchers out there today, calling our names... a lot of butchers calling the names of our children. Voices that beckon and coax and bully to follow them into places that our culture promises will be life-giving... but are, in fact, places of death. Parents, when was the last time you talked to your children about the dangers of social media? Or looked at their texts or their Facebook page? To not do so, frankly, is parental malpractice. There is something about these disembodied, depersonalized voices that invites our kids to speak and act in ways that are foreign to what you've raised them to be. And can be doorways into death and destruction. Only one voice leads to life. Do you know that voice when you hear it? Do your kids?



Sometimes when a ewe gives birth, she abandons the lamb for unknown reasons. And it will die there in the field unless the shepherd finds it. In Scotland these are called Bummer Lambs. The shepherd hand feeds it, wraps it up and keeps it close enough to hear his heartbeat. When the lamb is able to fend for itself, the shepherd returns it to the flock. And every morning when the shepherd calls to his sheep, guess who comes first and fastest? The bummer lambs. They know his voice, and they believe he loves them because they have experienced that love. Perhaps this morning, you feel like a bummer lamb... lost, abandoned, forsaken, forgotten. Guess what? The Lord is your shepherd. He makes you lie down in green pastures. He leads you beside still waters. He restores your soul.

## Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
  1. Compare Ps 23 to Ezekiel 34. What does that say about God's heart towards his people?
  2. When Jesus says, "I Am the Gate," what does that mean about those inside the pen? Those outside? Who is the shepherd in this first sermonette?
  3. When Jesus says, "I Am the Good Shepherd," what does that mean to you? What is most comforting about that? Most disturbing?