

The Shepherd and His Flock John 10:1-18

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. ² The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³ The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep 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 are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

¹⁹ At these words the Jews were again divided. ²⁰ Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?"

²¹ But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

Sermon The Shepherd Knows John 10:1-18

In this Easter season, the scripture texts take us back to the words of Jesus, words that the disciples recalled as they pondered the mystery of the resurrection, and what Jesus wanted them to do next.

Here Jesus speaks about himself as the shepherd, the guide and guard of those who love him.

The Good Shepherd teaching of Jesus takes place in the midst of the conflict between Jesus and those who have hardened their hearts against him. Immediately preceding this text, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. The formerly blind man was cast out of the synagogue by the Jews because he had confessed faith in Jesus (Jn 9:1–41). This event is followed by the teaching of Jesus that he is the Good Shepherd. The sheep know his voice, and he knows each of his sheep by name. He is not a thief or a robber. The Jewish leaders reject Jesus, so Jesus responds by teaching that he—not they—is the door of the sheep (10:1–10).

That is one of Jesus' seven "I am" statements in John's Gospel. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (6:48–51), "the light of the world" (8:12), "the door" (10:7), "the Good Shepherd" (10:11), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6), and "the true vine" (15:1). The Gospel of John intends to provide the answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?" Jesus is "I am" and I am is the Good Shepherd.

Ask a city person about open space, too much open space makes them nervous, so when I started thinking about sheep, I had to recall, my experience with sheep. Ask a city person what they know about sheep, and the first thing they say was: "Sheep are stupid, sheep are not dumb at all." It is the cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push

cows, but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first. Their shepherd—who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.”

Sheep know their shepherd and their shepherd knows them.

Sheep & shepherds develop a language of their own.

“Hmmm,” I thought. All over the Bible, the people of God are compared to sheep. The familiar and beloved words of Psalm 23 proclaim right away that God is our shepherd, making us, by definition, sheep. Psalm 100 proclaims that we are the sheep of God’s pasture, the flock of God’s hand.

Every place we look, the biblical writers find comfort in the fact that God is our shepherd, and we shall not lack anything. Every need is met and every danger taken care of. There were plenty of dangers for shepherds in ancient Palestine. In that world, the shepherd was absolutely responsible for the lives of the sheep. Fighting off bears and wolves, along with thieves, was part of the job description. If an animal were eaten by a wolf or bear, the shepherd had to bring in part of the sheep’s body to prove that the animal had eaten it.

The shepherd’s staff mentioned in Psalm 23 is a weapon for such battles. The rod used there is the shepherd’s crook, used to rescue lost lambs and guide the others over rocky hills. I love that the “rod” mentioned in “spare the rod, spoil the child” is the same Hebrew word as the shepherd’s crook. Sparing the rod isn’t about punishment — it’s about guiding and helping, like the shepherd does with his crook.

In ancient Palestine sheep roamed without fences or strict boundary lines, and shepherds spent their days wandering with the sheep. They walked along as the sheep grazed, and at night they slept with the sheep. In the passage before this one, Jesus proclaimed that he was the gate. Sheep often slept in open enclosures, and the shepherd slept at the opening, to guard the sheep. With the shepherd there, the door is safe

It’s a good thing about the Good Shepherd who’s also a door: there are those two sides. On one side of the door, there’s grace and mercy. There’s a good and loving shepherd who cares for his sheep. He opens to provide food and nourishment as he leads the sheep to pasture and streams of living water. But he closes the door to provide protection from thieves and hired hands and wolves, the terms Jesus uses in our text for false shepherds: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them” (vv 11–12). On one side is mercy, but on the other side is judgment.

Some of the same false shepherds had revealed their true colors immediately before our text. In John 9, Jesus healed a man who was blind from birth. The Jews took issue with this healing because it had been done on a Sabbath Day. Jesus did not respect their laws, so they rejected him and refused to believe in him. They threw the man who’d been healed out of the synagogue. However, when Jesus found him and revealed to him that he was the Christ, the man believed in Jesus and worshiped him. The Good Shepherd was his open door—but a closed door to those who rejected him.

Think of it like the door that at God’s command Noah and his sons built into the ark. On the day it started to rain, Noah and his family huddled inside the ark. The hand of God then closed that door. As the door shut, the rain that fell for God’s judgment on the earth was kept safely outside. For Noah and his family, for those who had faith and believed God, the door provided protection. And then, when the flood subsided and the waters were gone, the door opened and Noah went out to find God’s blessing on the earth. The door shut for protection and opened for blessing. But for those outside the ark, that door meant judgment. The door was shut to those who did not believe. They perished. It’s the same door, but that door is received much differently depending on which side of the door you’re facing.

The same can be said for Jesus. Those of us who believe are on the inside of the door. For us, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us. He knows us and loves us, and likewise we know him

and follow him. We know the sound of his voice and follow where he leads. But for those who do not believe in Jesus, he is a harsh judge. They are blind and unable to see his goodness and mercy. They reject him. They reject him and those who believe in him. The formerly blind man was put out of the synagogue because he confessed faith in Jesus. Peter and John were arrested for teaching and healing in the name of Jesus.

All along the way, the shepherd got to know the flock, and often gave each sheep a name. The shepherd knew which sheep was fearful and which one was likely to wander off, which one was irritable and which one was sweet.

In the Holy Scriptures, the New Testament, Jesus picked up this same idea. And when Jesus proclaimed that, as the good shepherd, he knew his flock and they knew him, he was doing no more than any other shepherd.

But Jesus called himself not just a shepherd, but the good shepherd. The Greek word translated as “good” is the strongest possible word for good — not the ordinary everyday word. It really means noble, beautiful, worthy, and exemplary. Jesus was telling his flock that he was the best possible shepherd — the ideal shepherd, one willing to lay down his life for the sheep. The shepherd beyond all others — the great shepherd. In all of these “I am” sayings from John’s gospel, Jesus compared himself with the most ordinary things — light, bread, water, and in this passage, a shepherd. He never said that he’s the good king, or the new high priest, or the scholar who knew the truth. And, when he chose a shepherd, he chose a lowly, smelly job. He chose a job done by the children of the family or a hired hand.

It’s true that at that time, “shepherd” was a frequent metaphor for the ruler of a country ...but no one actually wanted to be a shepherd. Jesus was turning the image of the king on its head — using the metaphor but reminding his friends that he was the shepherd who knew the sheep, who lived with the sheep, who provided for the sheep. Seeing his friends, knowing their need for guidance and protection, he offered them the ancient image of the shepherd.

So also for you, as you go in and out and follow Jesus, hearing his Word and recognizing his voice, following him to green pastures and living waters, being defended against wolves and thieves and hirelings, being gently prodded back to the green pastures and away from danger. You will receive Jesus as your Lord and master, as your Good Shepherd. But since he is rejected by the outside world, they will also reject you. The world will see you and associate you with the judgment of Jesus. They will hate you and try to silence you even as the Jews hated Peter and John and the man born blind.

But we know enough to know that the shepherd can’t drive the sheep anywhere, really, can’t cajole them, yell at them, or expect them to follow. There is no planning ahead with sheep. The shepherd only gets anything done by being with the sheep — in the middle of the flock. In this, we understand something about our God. God insists on being in the middle of us, mixed into our lives, right in the midst of our stupid choices, our confusion, our tendency to wander off where we shouldn’t be and our constant need to be called back.

“This passage exemplifies Jesus’ relationship with God and his relationship with us. Jesus says that he “knows his own sheep, and his own sheep know him.” However, as Christians this is what we strive to do our whole life. Jesus confidently says “the sheep will recognize my voice.” Jesus is crazy! I am always looking for his word and guidance in my life... and I’m sure that most of the time I fail to see it. It is hard to distinguish what he is telling us from all the extraneous noise we hear. We are not like the sheep in this passage. It is so easy for them to hear Jesus because there are no outside influences pulling them astray. For us the media is telling us how we should look, how we should dress, what we should buy. School and jobs influence how we spend our money. Our friends influence our choices.”

This helped me understand how hard it is to hear the voice of Jesus, and how hard we have to work to listen.

There are plenty of dangers for us, too.

The danger of being seduced by our stuff or thinking that we're worth no more and no less than our title or salary, or forgetting the things that feed the soul, or living with our addiction, or being too busy. Our preoccupations with work, our screens, shopping, or easy anger leading us away from Jesus. We're constantly getting off the path and needing to be called back.

“Nonetheless, Jesus is confident we will be able to distinguish him from all the other influences. The fact that Jesus is so sure we will be able to do it gives me hope. If Jesus is certain I will hear his voice, who am I to say I won't. As sheep we are all important to him. Jesus has told us it is possible to know him and it is possible to have a relationship with him.”

Because he says that, we can have confidence.

But we are invited to be more than sheep.

As we follow Jesus, we are invited to live lives of faith like the exemplary shepherd. We're invited to follow where the good shepherd leads us and to lead and serve like he did. We can't get anything done in God's world by charging off, hoping God's people will follow our powerful vision or our ten-point plan. We have to hang around with other sheep. The place where we communicate the grace of God is right in the middle of other sheep, mixing in with the world we hope to make better.

We follow God revealed as the good shepherd, the shepherd who cares for the sheep, and he invites us to love in the same way. As sheep, we are stupid. We miss the grace of God over and over, miss seeing signs of love and forgiveness every day, and miss chances to take care of each other. And yet there is the good shepherd, always calling us back to the good water and the abundant grass, giving all that we need, never letting us wander too far. No matter how far we think we've wandered away, the good shepherd is there, watching out, ready to bring us back to the pasture. No matter how stupid we think we've been, the good shepherd awaits, and we belong to the flock. The shepherd knows the sheep, and our God knows us.

We are sheep, but also followers of the great shepherd. He invites us to care for the flock alongside him. The strength for that comes from the shepherd himself, right in the midst of us, the flock.

We, the sheep, may be stupid — but we are smart enough to know our shepherd, and to know where we belong. Amen.