

Easter 4 (Good Shepherd Sunday), May 3, 2020**Text:** John 10:1–10**Other Lessons:** Acts 2:42–47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19–25**Goal:** That hearers recognize the Good Shepherd's voice and follow him through suffering and disappointment to abundant life.**SERMON: Shepherd by Day, Gate by Night**

Jesus' opening words, "Truly, truly," bind this text to ch 9 (the man born blind), where the Pharisees, self-proclaimed teachers of Israel, indignantly ask, "Are we also blind?" (9:40). Jesus responds, "Now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains" (9:41). Our text proves not only how truly Jesus had spoken, but also the power of his Gospel voice: The formerly blind man (and all whom the Spirit calls) hears and follows him to abundant life.

Jesus said, "**I am the sheep's door**" (v. 7). When Jesus said "sheep," he was talking about people. What does it mean to be the people's door?

Jesus also says, "**I am the good shepherd**" (vv. 11, 14). That's easier to understand. We're the sheep and Jesus is the shepherd. He is not only the shepherd, but is also the "**GOOD shepherd**"—a shepherd who protects the sheep, even at the risk of his life.

We like the shepherd. Most of us feel vulnerable, and it's comforting to know that we have a Good Shepherd watching over us—keeping us from running into the ditch—protecting us from wolves that would devour us.

Personally, I like the idea that Jesus is my shepherd—that he is watching over me—keeping me on the right path. I like the idea that Jesus will come to find me when I wander off—prepared to carry me back to the fold when I can't make it back under my own power.

Being a shepherd isn't a sometime job. Shepherds don't work forty-hour weeks. I looked on the Internet for information about shepherds, but didn't find much. Most web sites having to do with shepherds are about church ministries or German shepherd dogs. But I did find one site entitled "Unusual Ways of Making a Living."

It told about a young woman who is a shepherd in Colorado. She works 18 hour days, and sleeps with a 30-30 rifle to guard the sheep against coyotes and bears. Most wouldn't find her job attractive, but she likes it. "There aren't all the little hassles," she says. "Being alone lets you get your thinking together," she says. Besides that, she is in great demand. Not many people want to be shepherds these days.

So Jesus says, "**I am the good shepherd**," and we appreciate that. But then he says, "**I am the sheep's door**" (v. 7). What does he mean?

In Jesus' day, a village sheepfold would have a gate to protect the sheep. But shepherds had to stay in the countryside for days at a time. Out there, a shepherd would have to gather the sheep together in a secluded place. At night, the shepherd would lay down his bedroll in the entrance so that a predator would have to get by him before it could get to the sheep. William Barclay, who wrote a commentary on the Gospel of John, says:

"In the most literal sense the shepherd was the door; there was no access to the sheep-fold except through him."

So the shepherd walked with the sheep during the day, leading them to green pastures and protecting them from danger. At night, the shepherd became the gate, using his body—his presence—to block animals that might harm the sheep.

So when Jesus says, "**I am the good shepherd**," he means, "I put my life on the line EVERY DAY to protect the sheep." And when Jesus says, "**I am the sheep's door**," he means, "I put my life on the line EVERY NIGHT to protect the sheep." Whether Jesus is the shepherd or the gate, he is there to protect the sheep—and we are his sheep. We are the ones whom Jesus loves. We are the ones for whom Jesus gave his life. We are the ones in Jesus' care now—day and night.

We need a shepherd. We need a shepherd to guide us along the right paths—to help us to make good decisions. We live in a complicated world where there are few standards—few guideposts—to guide us. We make decisions every day—and some of those decisions have the potential to make or break us.

Important decisions seldom announce themselves as such. More often, we make what seems a small decision—that leads to another small decision—and then another—and another. Pretty soon, we find ourselves in a place that we hadn't expected to be. Sometimes that's good—but accidental journeys often lead downward rather than upward. That's certainly how the tempter plans it. Walter Farrell puts it this way:

The Devil does not shock a saint into alertness by suggesting whopping crimes.

He starts off with little, almost inoffensive things to which even the heart of a saint would make only mild protests.

So how does Jesus prepare us for the small temptations that have the potential to unravel our lives? We might take note of the way that Jesus prepared his disciples for their work.

- One of the ways that Jesus prepared the disciples was his TEACHING ministry. Jesus taught his disciples many things—some of which they understood right way, but many of which they understood only after the resurrection.
- One of the ways that Jesus prepared his disciples was his HEALING ministry. Jesus did great and wonderful things for people in need. Jesus' disciples had the opportunity to see his power at work—God's power at work.
- But one of the most important ways that Jesus prepared his disciples was simply by SPENDING TIME with them—walking the dusty roads of Palestine with them—sharing meals with them—telling them stories—showing them by example what it means to walk a Godly walk.

In this, Jesus operated much like a shepherd. Shepherds walked the roads and the pathways with their sheep—leading them—keeping them from danger—talking to them—calling them by name.

Jesus was a shepherd to his disciples, and his shepherding skills prepared his disciples for their great mission once he ascended back into his heavenly glory.

That should be instructive for us. The time that we spend with Jesus prepares us for life—for the challenges that we will face. The time that we spend with Jesus prepares us for the decisions we have to make. That's one reason we come here to worship each week. This is time that we spend with Jesus, learning from his example—from his teachings.

But we need more than an hour a week with Jesus. We need to spend time with Jesus in PRAYER. We need some sort of intentional routine to read the BIBLE regularly—or, at least, to read a daily devotional guide like *Portals of Prayer*. We need to be involved in SMALL GROUPS with other Christians—people who embody our Lord—people whom the Lord has sent to guide us. Those all count as time spent with Jesus the shepherd. They prepare us for the decisions that that will set us on an upward or downward road.

National Geographic magazine once ran an article that illustrates what I'm talking about. It was an article about the Alaskan Bull Moose. During the breeding season, the male of the species battle for dominance. They butt heads, using their antlers as a weapon. Usually the antlers of one moose will break off in one of the collisions—and that spells the end of the fight. The moose with the strongest antlers wins.

The article then went on to make this point. The battle isn't won or lost in the few minutes that the moose butt heads. The battle is won or lost much earlier, when the moose are eating to gain weight—to bulk up. The moose that consumes the best diet in the summer is the moose that will win the battle in the fall.

The same principle applies in every arena. Football games are won on the TRAINING field as much as on the PLAYING field. By the time the game starts, much has already been decided.

And so it is with us. When temptations come—when critical decisions are to be made—the time that we have spent walking with Jesus the shepherd can make all the difference. What we have learned by walking with him can save us. It's then that Jesus the shepherd becomes Jesus the door—Jesus the gate—Jesus the one who stands between us and the evil one who would devour us.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, **And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil**” (Matthew 6:13,ESV). That's an important prayer, because we live in a world where evil rears its head in unexpected places. The time that we spend with Jesus the shepherd prepares us for the times when we find ourselves head-to-head with evil.

Spend some time with the Jesus the shepherd:

- Let Jesus teach you how to live.
- Let Jesus direct you to a safe haven where you can sleep soundly.
- Let Jesus lie down across the entrance to be the gate—the one through whom intruders will have to pass to get to you.
- Let Jesus lead you into green pastures.
- Let Jesus guide and protect you.
- Let Jesus deliver you from evil.

If you will do that, Jesus will lead you off the downward road onto the upward road. He will restore your soul.

Conclusion: Being a sheep of the Good Shepherd is not so bad, after all. Who would not want to experience such love, such caring, and such self-sacrifice? This is the best kind of life: life lived in security and freedom, life with a purpose and goal, life with a capital “L,” life “to the full.”

Shepherds had distinctive calls, as well as pet names for each of their sheep by which the sheep recognized their true shepherd. Have you considered what pet name your Shepherd has for you? Wayward? Lazybones? Rebel? Or is it True Blue? Earnest? Fervent?

Surely goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life—if you will let Jesus be your shepherd.