



Sermon: “All We Like Sheep”

John 10:11-18

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**The fourth of five Lenten services
shared by the churches of Hatfield**

When I dive into a text and thrash around as I like to do, I usually resurface with more questions than answers. Yet I've found it is in asking these questions, as a body, that we arrive at new understandings of how the seeds of scripture flower in our hearts and take root in our lives. So come along with me tonight as we ponder the fourth of the five "I AM" statements of Jesus in John's Gospel: "I am the good shepherd."

John 10:11-18

[Jesus said:] ¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The 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. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No 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."

The idea of Jesus as the good shepherd is deeply ingrained in our culture. In fact, the image on this painting may be among the first that come to mind when we think about Jesus. The previous church I served had this very image on its huge stained glass window behind the altar, and you've probably seen windows just like it as well.

What makes Jesus a good shepherd? We heard him say that a good shepherd cares for his sheep, to the point of giving his life for them. This truth is about to hit us broadside: On Good Friday, with shock, horror and then gratitude, we will once again receive the surpassing gift of the Crucified God for our sake as we prepare once again to proclaim the great victory of life over death.

But more specifically, what are the qualities of a good shepherd? Let's consider the opposite is--a hired hand in John's gospel, or a truly bad shepherd, as in Ezekiel 34. There the prophet rails against the self-centered leaders of Israel as bad shepherds. "Prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? ³ But you eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock.'"

In contrast, Ezekiel says that a good shepherd is relentless in searching out those who have become

lost. ¹¹ ‘For thus says the Lord GOD: “Indeed I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out my sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. ¹³ And I will bring them out...and feed them in good pasture...I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick.”

Perhaps you heard the words of Psalm 23 echoing through these verses – and with good reason, both Jesus and Ezekiel had to have known them well.

But where are we in tonight’s gospel? I think we must be the sheep. And if so, then what is our experience of being led by a truly good shepherd?

I think we find the road map of that experience in Psalm 23. So that it’s fresh in our minds, I invite you to say it with me in whatever translation you know best (this is the NKJV):

The LORD *is* my shepherd;

I shall not ^[a]want.

² He makes me to lie down in ^[b]green pastures;

He leads me beside the ^[c]still waters.

³ He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name’s sake.

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You *are* with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.
⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Think about when we typically encounter this psalm: Usually it's because we have become lost. Something has happened that causes us to question the security of life that we once knew. The death of a loved one, which why we find Psalm 23 so often at funerals. Or we are in the presence of a dying person, and whisper it in their ear. More than once I have had the experience of those who no longer seemed to be communicating show with slight movements that they are following along with each verse. They are clinging to these words as we may be clinging to them on our own deathbed, or whenever find ourselves at the edge of despair, when fear threatens to overwhelm us.

Lost in this way, we have strayed from the promise of the gospel. We are tired. We're weary. We long for the safety and comfort we once knew. But now we have wandered to the edge of a cliff. The vast emptiness is

threatening to swallow us up, and we don't know the way back.

It is at this moment that our Good Shepherd calls to us, because he knows everything about us. We know the sound of his voice, as Jesus tells us in John, so we turn to listen and immediately position ourselves to follow him. Psalm 23 is a travelogue our experience of being led back (something like "Rick Steves' The Way Home," if that program existed; did I just compare Rick Steves to Jesus?). And the first step we take in this journey is to proclaim: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."

Psalm 23 may be a roadmap home, but it is not a straight shot at high speed. Instead it is a peaceful journey of grace. We are invited to rest in green pastures. We pass by peaceful waterways where we find our thirst quenched and our soul restored. Even though we travel along well-charted pathways, we still encounter dark valleys in which we struggle against fear. Through these valleys, though, and up the other side, our Shepherd leads us with a sure foot that gives us sure footing as well; think of mountain goats who are so nimble even on steep, icy cliffs. Our souls are then strengthened as we hear about the riches that await us in the house of the Lord--a lavish table, precious oil for anointing, and our cup overflowing.

In the psalm's last verse we are almost home. We can see the flock in the distance. Yet it is not the arrival that gives us hope for the future, but the conviction we

voice at moment: “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.” The Hebrew word for “follow” actually means “pursue,” in the sense of what enemies do, as in Exodus where the Egyptians had resolved to chase down the escaping Israelites. So what this last verse of Psalm 23 is really saying is: “From now on, for all the days of my life, only goodness and mercy will be chasing me down.” With the Lord as our shepherd, any pursuing enemies are completely out of the picture.

I myself have returned to this assurance time and again when the chips seem to be down, when despair is beckoning and the temptation to give into that despair is great. Yet when I remember to look behind me, what do I see? Goodness and mercy chasing me, to the point that I’ve decided it’s some kind of divine law. I can’t get away from them, even if I tried. What we mean here is goodness of our Shepherd who always finds us, and the mercy of a God who always forgives us and welcomes us back with a love that is as vast as the universe.

And then the final phrase, best translated like this: “I will continually return to the Lord my whole life long.”

In the 40 days of Lent we are continually turning and returning to God. Let tonight be a reminder that no matter how lost you feel, Jesus always knows where you are – and if you simply turn and listen to his voice, he will bring you back. Amen.

