



The Good Shepherd

John 10:1-10

Pastor Jim Rademaker

Years ago, Sara and I and our three young boys were heading to Sara's grandpa's funeral in Iowa, eight hours away. Less than a mile down the road the car stopped. We were broken down alongside the road in sweltering heat with over four hundred miles yet to go!

Luckily, we broke down right across the road from one of those big, national, auto repair places. How fortunate. Yet, I wasn't overly optimistic. As you might know, auto repair shops are always busy. The only way you can get in is what? Make an appointment. And good luck getting a same-day appointment!

And of course, they couldn't get us in. All the appointments were filled. They couldn't help us out. And why should they? They didn't know us from Adam. We were no one special to them. And we didn't know them. We were just a number. We were left on our own. Left to fend for ourselves, with a baby and two toddlers in the sweltering heat, stuck along the side of the road. Mourning the loss grandpa and being apart from the rest of the family. Wondering what we were going to do!

And then, we got a hold of our local mechanic. We knew him and he knew us. He too, was busy, as all mechanics are. But he made room for us. He took time out of his busy schedule. He inconvenienced himself for us. He helped bear our burden and squeezed us into his already hectic schedule. Within two hours we were on our way once again!

Over the years, we've had various vehicles in for repair. One time, I took an old car in and told him to fix whatever he felt needed fixing. Would you even dream of doing such a thing at most repair shops! Imagine how many things they would come up with that needed replacing and how much it would cost! But I know my mechanic. I trusted him to do what was best. I trusted that he had my best interests at heart and wasn't going to take advantage of me.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."

The following is a shepherding story as told by a neighbor. "The tenant sheepman on the farm next to my first ranch was the most indifferent manager I had ever met. He was not concerned about the condition of his sheep. His land was neglected. He gave little or no time to his flock, letting them pretty well forage for themselves as best they could, both summer and winter. They fell prey to dogs, cougars and rustlers.

In my mind's eye I can still see them standing at the fence, huddled sadly in little knots, staring wistfully through the wires at the rich pastures on the other side. To all their distress, the heartless, selfish owner seemed utterly callous and indifferent. He simply did not care. What if his sheep did want green grass; fresh water; shade; safety or shelter from the storms? What if they did want relief from wounds, bruises, disease and parasites? He ignored their needs – he couldn't care less. Why should he – they were just sheep – fit only for the slaughter-house."
(from *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* by Phillip Keller)

Two shepherds. The True Shepherd and the false shepherd. The bad shepherd and the Good Shepherd.

But Jesus isn't really talking about animals, is He? He's talking about us. He likens us to sheep. Not lions or tigers or bears. Strong. Independent. But sheep. Weak. Defenseless. Needy. Dependent. Have you ever seen a wild sheep or a documentary on a wild sheep? You know why? They don't exist. How utterly and completely dependent sheep are on their shepherd. Sheep are high maintenance creatures who need 24/7 shepherding or they basically die. Without Jesus, we are hopelessly lost and condemned to die.

We are sheep. The only question is "Who's our shepherd?" "What's he like?"

Our text today flows from the previous chapter, where Jesus is responding to shepherds who operated like the abusive rancher we heard of earlier, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, who were supposed to care for God's people, especially in regard to their spiritual care. The picture comes from the prophet Ezekiel, centuries earlier.

Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. (Ezekiel 34)

The nation of Israel knew about sheep and shepherding, like Wisconsinites know about cows and dairy farming. It was in their blood. Passed down from generation to generation. The backbone of their culture. Not so much the corporate farm, as the family farm. I didn't grow up on the farm, but I spent my share of time around farms. Being somewhat an outsider, I thought cows were just cows. Nameless creatures. No. They had names, each and every one of them.

A hired hand wouldn't necessarily know that. Nor an outsider, a city boy. But the farmer, he knew. He knew all their names: Bessie, Milly, Daisy, Blackie, Brownie, Blondie, Goldie, Bossy, Clover, Lazy, Fuzzy, Jolly, Minnie, and Milkshake. They *weren't* just a bunch of cows. They were family. And being family, they had names.

Jesus said, *"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."*

And a good farmer cares for his cows. He puts his energy and his money into his cows. He may not have the most impressive equipment or the newest pick-up truck around, but that's okay. He takes care of his cows above all else. He sees that they're well-fed, and watered, and milked on time, and cleaned, and cooled in the heat of summer, and get proper veterinary care.

The good farmer who cares for his cows. The good shepherd who cares for his sheep. God, who cares for you above all else, even His own life! *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* And that, He did for you! Do you think God cares? Do you think you're in good hands? The next time you forget, look to the Good Shepherd on the cross. There, for you. Does He care? Are you in good hands? Need you ask?

Unlike the bad shepherds, the false shepherds, who only look out for themselves, Ezekiel continues ...

"For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ..."

Two shepherds. The bad and the good. The false and the true. The Good Shepherd. Could you be in better hands!

Like sheep, sometimes we can be pretty dumb. Not very bright in regard to the things of God. Forgetful. Stubborn. Self-centered. Thinking we know best. Wondering off on our own. Getting ourselves in trouble. Chasing after what look to be greener pastures. Going it alone, and getting ourselves lost, over and over again. Needing direction. Needing the care of Another.

He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

What's God like? What comes to your mind when you think, God? What's He really like? Is He harsh? Is He kind? Is He distant? Is He really engaged in what is going on or kind of impersonal? When you think, God, what comes into your mind? When you pray, what is the visual image of what God is like, who is listening to you? As A.W. Tozer puts it, "What comes into your mind when you think about God is the most important thing about your whole life."

Remember my mechanic, who took such good care of me? Who knows me so well? The one I trust? Guess what his name is? Believe it or not, he goes by the name "Shep". The good Shep. The caring one. The one who knows you by name. The one you can trust. Unlike corporate ranching, or corporate auto repair, which is pretty much every sheep for itself, Jesus' image is the Palestinian shepherd who *knows* his sheep and his sheep *know* him.

What's God like? What comes to your mind when you think of God? He's The Good Shepherd. He knows us by name. And those that are His, recognize His voice and they follow wherever He leads. Wherever the Shepherd goes, there also go His sheep. Sheep and shepherd together. To follow Jesus is not to take a privileged detour around the hardships of life but to go through them together with Jesus. Jesus isn't the way around suffering and death but the only way through suffering and death that leads to resurrection and life. (livingontheedge.org) He said, *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."*

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:34)

Unlike the false shepherd, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. For you. The voice of the Good Shepherd is the voice of the Crucified and Risen One. The One who bore your sins in His body on the tree. The One who is the Shepherd and Overseer of your soul.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus is also the door of the sheep. Don't think of a wooden door on hinges here. Think rather of a pen with an opening in which the shepherd himself lies down to sleep at night so that you literally get to the sheep over the shepherd's dead body. That's how bound the shepherd is to his sheep in this image. He literally lays down his life for them. He lays down in the entrance so that that the only way in and out is through him.

Jesus said what? *"No one comes to the Father, except through me."* There's only one door that leads to the Father's green pasture of eternal life. And the way is through the narrow door of Jesus' death and resurrection. There's no other way, no other door, no true shepherd other than Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Clearly, Jesus had Psalm 23 in mind when He said "I am the good Shepherd." He wants to be known in shepherding terms. A shepherd is one who basically lives with His flock. Dwells with them. He is, for all intents and purposes, one of the sheep. The sheep recognize their shepherd's voice, and he knows each of his sheep by the name he gave them. He goes in front of them, leading instead of driving them. The sheep follow him because they trust him. They know he will not lead them down any destructive or dangerous path. They will follow him even where their instincts tell them not to go, like through dark valleys with hungry wolves eyeing them from the cliffs.

When all is said and done, the welfare of any flock is entirely dependent upon what? The management afforded them by their owner. (William Cwirla) *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*

Who is *your* shepherd? Who are you following? Do you know your Master's voice? Do your ears perk up when He speaks to you through His Word? The Christian life is much simpler than we often make it. The Christian life is about looking to your Shepherd. Trusting Him with your life, and everything else. As His beloved sheep, you can say, "Jesus is my shepherd, and I lack nothing. Oh, I may not be the wealthiest sheep in the pasture, nor the wisest, nor even the healthiest all the time. But I lack nothing.

I have God's kingdom and His righteousness. I have an eternal inheritance that no one can take from me. I have all that I need to support my body and life. More than that, I have His Word, His forgiveness, His peace, and eternal life. *My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.* Having that, what more do I need?" (Cwirla)

to hear the audio, go to hopelbc.com