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"The Good Shepherd"

Psalm 23; John 10:1-16; Acts 2:42-47 | Peter 2:19-25

PRAYER OF PRAISE

Let us pray. Christ is the door by which we enter God's family, the source of our comfort and the anchor of our faith. Through Christ we are led to the land of promise where peace is eternal and grace has no bounds. As we enter this sanctuary may we know you are with us and give you all the honor due your holy name. All glory honor and praise be to you Oh God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 10:1-16

Jesus was a carpenter, but he was from a long line of shepherds. Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel was the keeper of great flocks. Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, when God called him lead the children of Israel out of bondage to the Promised Land. David, who wrote the 23rd Psalm, was a shepherd boy called in from the fields to be anointed to become the next, and one of the greatest kings of Israel. When Isaiah spoke of the coming of the Messiah he worded it by saying: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd! He will gather his lambs into his arms." Shepherds were the first people outside Jesus' family to be told about his birth, and the first people besides Joseph and Mary to see him. In John 10, Jesus brings all of this imagery to a head when he calls himself the Good Shepherd. Let's hear what Jesus has to say about it in the 10th chapter of John.

Let us pray. Lord help us to follow the lead of the Good Shepherd as we reflect and meditate on this your word. Open our minds to receive, our hearts to believe and move our feet to follow, in Jesus' name we pray.

A little girl reciting the 23rd Psalm began, "The Lord is my shepherd; that's all I want." She may have missed the wording, but she sure got the theology right.

In this 10th chapter of John Jesus takes what was one of the most beloved passages of the Psalms and inserts himself in it when he claims that he is the Good Shepherd. Not only does he claim the title but he precedes it with the verb that has long been associated with the name of God. He precedes it with the word I AM. In the Old Testament "I AM," Y'HWH, was the name for God. When Jesus says, "I AM The Good Shepherd," it is no accident.

If Jesus is The Good Shepherd, I want to be a good sheep.

Yesterday at the Catfish and Shrimp Festival they had a Petting Zoo. There were 3 goats, 2 donkeys, 2 ducks and one sheep. It was a mixed flock to say the least. Those of you with roots on the farm know that sheep are not always those warm, cuddly little animals that us city folks experience in a petting zoo when they're standing still.

In her book The Preaching Life, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a conversation she had with a friend who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. According to him, sheep are not so dumb. He said, "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. You drive cattle, her friend said, but you lead sheep. Sheep will only move if their shepherd goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right." 1

Sheep are smarter than spooked cows. They are smart enough to trust their shepherd. It is in this respect that we are to emulate sheep. We need to have the sense God gave a sheep.

So first question is: What are the needs of a sheep? The first and obvious answer to that question is: protection. Jesus says that there are thieves and predators always trying to get into the sheep pen, trying to devour the sheep: coyotes, bears, wolves, or cougars. The wolf's intent is a meal. The thieves' intent is to steal.

Years ago there was a story carried in various newspapers about a woman from Missouri who was startled out of a dead sleep one night by some desperate cries of "Help! Help!" You know how it is when you awake to some sound: you are not at all certain whether you really heard something or if it was just a dream. At first she thought perhaps her husband had cried out, but he was sleeping soundly next to her. Then suddenly she heard the cries again: "Help! Help!" Finally she threw back the covers and headed downstairs toward their living room. "Help!" went the plaintive voice yet again. "Where are you?" the woman replied. "In the fireplace," came the answer.

Sure enough, dangling in the fireplace with his head sticking through the flue was a burglar, upside down and quite snugly stuck! The police and fire department got him out eventually, though not before having to disassemble the mantle and some of the masonry. Perhaps the best part of the story was what this woman did in the meantime. She flipped on all the lights and videotaped the whole thing. I don't know what the two talked about while waiting for the police and company to arrive, but I would have been tempted to quote John 10: "Verily I tell you, anyone who does not enter by the door but climbs in another way is a thief and a robber!" 2

In Jesus' day, a shepherd would lead his sheep out to distant areas and stay there for days. Being a good shepherd he would create a temporary corral, a pen in which to keep the sheep when they were not grazing. Using the crude stones of the field a shepherd could quickly put together such a structure and at night he would lay his body down in the opening of this corral making himself the door. No sheep could wander away at night unless it stepped over the sleeping

shepherd and no wolf could come in to do harm without waking the shepherd. The shepherd is the gate who "lays down his life" for the sheep.

Not only do sheep need protection from predators and thieves, they need protection from themselves.

Without a shepherd to lead them they are liable to wander off a cliff. Without a shepherd to lead them sheep will graze the same hills until they become desert wastes. They will not move on, on their own. Without a shepherd to lead them they will pollute their own ground until it is run over with disease and parasites. To their own ill health they will live in their own filth. Sheep have heavy coats. They need to be led to still waters because they will be weighed down by running waters and drown. Their fleece can grow very long and become weighed down with mud, manure, burrs and debris. They can become burdened to their own destruction because when they lie down they sometimes roll over. Once on their backs they cannot right themselves unless a shepherd comes and puts them back on their feet.

Friends, Jesus description of himself as the Good Shepherd is both making an invitation and stating some facts. The invitation is to follow Jesus. The facts are We are like sheep. Isaiah says, 'All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned aside to our own wicked ways.'

All we like sheep need protection. All we like sheep need protection from predators and thieves. All we like sheep need protection from ourselves. We are stubborn. We want what we like - even when what we like is not good for us. We need to be led to new green pastures lest we eat ourselves out of house and home. When we get weighed down with the burrs and mud and debris and the manure of this world and we need the Good Shepherd to come clean us up. When we get knocked over and find ourselves upside down unable to right ourselves we need the Good Shepherd to come and get us back on our feet.

All we like sheep need direction.

A story is told of a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower." 3

Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "In order to be a leader a man must have followers. To have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence the supreme quality of a leader is unquestionable integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, on a football field, in an army, or in an

office. If a man's associates find him guilty of phoniness, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose" 4

Jesus has unquestionable integrity. He can be trusted. He has a high purpose. His purpose is to lead us and point us to the abundant life he came to provide.

I once saw a television special about middle-east shepherds - people who live a life that isn't radically different from that of their first century counter-parts. It was fascinating to see the lives they led, wandering endlessly in search of fields where their sheep might graze. Every night, the sheep were led into a protected area - a "sheepfold." Sometimes, there would be three or four or five flocks gathered by a number of shepherds into the same area. The shepherds would take shifts staying up throughout the night, making sure that wolves or other wild animals weren't able to make their way into the protected area. In the morning, a person would wonder if there was any hope of separating one flock from another. But interestingly enough, it was a very simple matter. Each shepherd went to opposite corners of the field, and began to call the sheep. As the sheep heard the shepherds' voices, they immediately began to move towards the one that belonged to their shepherd. After a few minutes, all the sheep were separated into their own flocks, and the shepherds lead them away. Sheep know the voice of their own shepherd, and they follow. 5

Yes, People, like any herd of sheep, need a shepherd not only to protect us but to direct us.- somebody to point us in the right directions, somebody to help us with our decisions. We need to listen carefully to our Lord's voice.

Perhaps this has been one of our problems. Jesus' voice, his words, his story, are not familiar enough to us. Jesus' voice is drowned out by the muzac of this world, the cell phones and beepers and car horns and headphones and video and cable and headlines of this world.

Jesus' voice is speaking more than just on Sunday mornings in church. In all of our lives, whether it be church committee meetings, or business board meetings, do we spend sufficient time and attention on asking what it is that our Good Shepherd wants? Are we really letting him be our Good Shepherd? Are we really ready to let him lead? Are we really ready to rely on him in our decisions?

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Jesus began this teaching with a warning about thieves and robbers and wolves that come to steal, kill and rob. He ends this section warning about shepherds who do not care for their sheep, who run away at the sight of danger, who are only in it for the money, who are not committed to the sheep. Sadly, there are some who are charged to care for sheep that are like this. They run for their life rather than lay down their life. This is the opposite of what Jesus promises to do, and the opposite of what Jesus calls us to do for others.

In the 25th chapter of Matthew Jesus tells a parable about the last Judgment. He describes a great throne before which every person who has ever lived comes. On that throne is Jesus the Good Shepherd. He separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep are told to go to his right to a heavenly reward and the goats are told to go to his left for a very different one. When asked why, Jesus' answer is based on how the people had treated others. Jesus said, 'When I was hungry and thirsty you gave me food and drink. When I was sick, when I was in prison, you visited me. When I had no clothes or a place to stay you provided clothes for my body and shelter. Both groups were surprised. The sheep said they didn't know that they had done those things. The goats said, "We would have done it if we knew there was something in it for us." Jesus said, "As you did it to the least of these you did it to me. As you ignored the least of these you ignored me."

Sheep follow the Good Shepherd. Goats don't. Because the Good Shepherd cared for them, sheep follow his example and provide food and drink, clothes and shelter, comfort and care for others. Sheep follow the example of their Good Shepherd who did NOT run away in the face of danger, but laid down his life at great sacrifice and unimaginable physical, emotional and spiritual pain.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has claimed us. He knows us by name. He has promised to be there for us. He has promised to lead us beside quiet streams. He has promised to provide for our needs in his timing. Jesus wants to exercise leadership in our lives. He has promised to prepare a place for us to dwell here and a place for us to dwell with him forever in heaven.

I don't know about you, but the Lord is my Shepherd. That's all I want. All I want to trust in his protection and follow his direction, to follow his lead because compared to all the other voices in my life, compared to all the choices in my life, I want to put my trust in and follow him who boldly said, I AM ...THE Good Shepherd.

Let's pray,

Thank you lord for the care and feeding and leading you offer us. Thank you for sheep, the perfect animal to illustrate how we need to think of ourselves in relationship to you. Lord, thank you for sending your son Jesus to be The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep...us.

We pray for all who suffer this day from pains that are caused by others and those that are self-inflicted. Hear us O God as we intercede for sisters, brother, and strangers who are wounded and long to be made whole. Bless doctors and nurses and all who support them as daily they minister to the sick and infirm. May clinics, hospitals and places of convalescence be sources of healing. May those who dispense drugs and those who take them do so in order to reduce disorders and disease. May those facing death retain dignity and be graced with the assurance that Christ lives in their midst. For those grieving the loss of loved ones, like Carol Binns in the death of her daughter receive the comfort of your

Holy Spirit and the support of friends and family. For those plagued by phobias that hinder their freedom, illumine their dark places by the light of your love. May more and more come to know the protection and seek the direction of the Good Shepherd in whose name we pray. Amen.

1. The Preaching Life, Barbara Brown Taylor
2. Through the Gate, by Scott Hoezee
3. Adapted from S. I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases*
4. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Bits & Pieces*, September 15, 1994, p. 4.
5. The Voice of the Shepherd, by David J. Risendal

Minute for Mission: Compassion International

Jesus Loves the little children. All the children of the world. Red, brown and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.

This morning we have an opportunity to be ones who follow the example of The Good Shepherd who loves and cares for the little children of the world of Africa, Asia and South and Central America through Compassion International.

Jimmy Martin was supposed to share his experience with the child he has been sponsoring, but he had to go out of town to visit a friend who is in hospice care. Hopefully he will be able to share with you next week.

I'd like to ask for 3 minutes of your time to share a video about one life that has been blessed by Compassion international. This is the story of Hilda.

Compassion International has 65+ years of experience serving children, 6,700+ partners serving 1,800,000 children around the world. Today, Christians in churches across the country are speaking out and sharing their stories of child sponsorship on behalf of children living in poverty and the impact that sponsorship makes. There are millions of children living in poverty who are forced to work to help pay bills and can't go to school; who don't have safe water or electricity, who can't afford medicine or doctor visits when they are sick; who go to bed hungry many nights.

This morning there are 24 packets on the table in the Welcome Center. For \$38 a month, that's \$1.22 a day, these 24 children will be included in a program like Hilda's. Ten years ago Anne and I picked up a packet like those you see on the table. On that packet was a picture of a 3 year old boy named Edwin Enrique Segura Perez.

Edwin lives in San Salvador, El Salvador. For the last 10 years we have exchanged pictures, letters and birthday cards. He has kept me informed about

his studies, his involvement in his church, his Bible lessons, his love for "futbol" and regularly supplied me with his art work for my refrigerator. (hold up picture)

There are children waiting for sponsors like Edwin was waiting for us. I hope you will consider becoming a sponsor. There is a form in each packet for you to fill out and give to me and you can take the packet home and begin a new friendship with one of the children of the world that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, loves.