

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD

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John 10:11-18

The words of the 23rd Psalm are among the best known of any in scripture. Many of you know it by heart. As poetry, this psalm is exceptional with its powerful images that build from one to the next. As a theological statement, there is no greater truth than what we find in its words.

Psalm 23 describes God as a shepherd who nurtures, feeds, and protects the flock. As shepherd, God provides healing and righteousness. God provides protection against evil. God watches over the flock forever.

Now, we can talk about this psalm until the sheep come home, but there is no substitute for hearing its words.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The Jews of Jesus' day knew this psalm as well as we do, if not better. The image of God as a shepherd is not unique to this one particular psalm. We find an equally robust statement of God the shepherd in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. In that book of prophesy, God declares:

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I will feed them with good pasture... there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down... 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... You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God. (Ezekiel 34)

The Jews of Jesus' day would have also recognized and understood this portrayal of God as a shepherd. So, when Jesus declares, *I am the good shepherd*, they no doubt understood what he was saying but I am sure they were also likely

confused. On the one hand, they were familiar with the shepherd image. On the other hand, they probably wondered if this man Jesus, by taking the title of good shepherd for himself, is not somehow claiming to be God. The answer is, yes. Yes, this man Jesus is not only claiming to be God, he is God.

Just like those people of Jesus' day, we too are comfortably familiar with the image of the shepherd. Jesus, however, raises the bar on this image in two ways—through his sacrifice and his word.

The first addition that Jesus makes to the image of the shepherd is that of sacrifice. The good shepherd loves his sheep so much that he is willing to give his life for them. As we read today, *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.* Really? A shepherd is willing to die for some sheep? I would not think that that is normal, but this shepherd is not normal. He is willing to die for his sheep.

Jesus then describes a hired hand. The hired hand does not own the sheep. The hired hand is not invested in the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd. When the hired hand sees danger—such as an approaching wolf—the hired hand abandons his post because to him, getting hurt or killed is simply not worth it. The hired hand views his life as greater than the lives of the sheep he is supposed to be watching.

Today, deep into the season of Lent, two weeks from Easter, it is a good time for us to reflect on Jesus' sacrifice and his death on the cross and to ask ourselves what it means.

For one thing, it is further proof of Jesus' love for us. The good shepherd is not some hired hand that scurries off at the first sign of trouble. Jesus, himself, had every opportunity to escape his fate. He could have walked over the hill and disappeared into the night and never be seen again. But he didn't. He marched to the cross to demonstrate his love and commitment for us—God's love and commitment for us. Jesus is clear that he gives his life willingly—*No one takes it from me*, he explains.

And Jesus giving himself—giving his life on the cross—was not something made up at the last moment. We know from Scripture that this was part of God's plan for our salvation from the beginning of time. That Jesus would give himself so that we might live.

The first thing Jesus brings to the image of the good shepherd is sacrifice, the second is his accessibility. The good shepherd is there for all who hear his voice.

The people of Israel saw themselves as God's people, God's children, the chosen race—and they were. They, after all, are the ones God led out of Egypt. They were the ones God led across the wilderness. God gave them the Law. God gave them a

land. But Jesus is explaining here that they are not the only chosen people. He says, *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me... I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.* When these flocks are brought together, *there will be one flock, one shepherd.* This flock will not be limited to the people of Israel but will include all who hear Jesus' voice. Those who listen—those who hear—are Jesus' flock. In raising the bar of what it means to be a shepherd, Jesus opens the world to be part of his flock.

In this season of Lent, it is a good time for us to reflect on what it means to be sheep in this flock. It means, as we saw several weeks ago, that we are the ones who enter through his gate. Jesus is our way to salvation. We know his voice and follow him. He cares for us and keeps us safe. When we do wander away—which we frequently are guilty of—he drops everything and searches until he finds us and can bring us back to the fold.

In this season of Lent, as we approach the cross—that moment when Jesus gave himself—it is the best time to ask, “What does it mean for us to be part of this flock?” Will we follow the one whose voice we hear? Will we listen to that voice? Will we accept what he brings to us? And then, as Christians, we can also ask ourselves how do we treat others who are in the flock? How can we draw others to the flock to teach them, to lead them, and to give ourselves for them as Christ gave himself for us. These are some of the many questions that we are challenged to confront in this season of Lent. Amen.