

Our Shepherd Gives Fullness of Life

Our second reading is John 10:1-18. In our text for today, Jesus gives two more of his “I am” sayings, as he continues to reveal his saving mission as the Son of God. In contrast to false leaders, Jesus says he is the good shepherd and the gate, who will gather, give to and guard his sheep, his people.

Follow as I read **John 10:1-18**:

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. ¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The 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. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I 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. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No 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.”

Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd in a world of paradox and contrast. Of all people, the religious leaders of the Jews were to faithfully guide and care for God’s people. Yet, they had become corrupt, self-centered and uncaring, just as the prophets of old had predicted. Jesus contrasts himself with the status quo, saying that he had come, not to steal, kill and to destroy, as some in religious leadership were doing, but he had come to give life.

David, who was a shepherd as a young boy, derived a lot of the imagery for his psalms, such as Psalm 23, from his experience tending his father’s flocks. He became a type and forerunner of Christ, the Good Shepherd. The prophets

Isaiah (chapters 40, 56, etc.), Jeremiah (chapters 3, 50, etc.), Ezekiel (chapter 34) and Zechariah (chapter 10) all employed the image of shepherds as they denounced the false shepherds/leaders who were fleecing God's people/sheep. Jeremiah also prophesied that the Messiah would be a faithful shepherd (3:15; 31:10). And, Jesus in all four of the gospels, referred to himself as the shepherd who gathers and delivers his sheep, his people. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, and Scripture says he is the great shepherd of the sheep (Heb.13:20); and the chief shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4).

The biblical metaphor of God's people as the sheep of his pasture is a not very flattering image. Jesus uses illustrations easily understood by his audience, and everyone in this agrarian culture was familiar with sheep. It's possible the hostile reaction Jesus received had as much to do with his reference to his hearers being "sheep" as to their being false shepherds.

A very helpful book for those of us unfamiliar with sheep and the culture of shepherding is Phillip Keller's [*A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*](#). Keller grew up in East Africa, surrounded by "simple native herders whose customs closely resembled those of their counterparts in the Middle East." Also, as a young man he worked for eight years as a sheep owner and rancher. Keller caricatures sheep as unintelligent, prone to wander into danger, absolutely defenseless and helpless against rugged terrain and mountain cliffs and wild animals. They're at the same time are timid and stubborn, and demand a great amount of care, attention and hard work on the part of their shepherds. And shepherding, particularly in the ancient land of the Bible, was not for the lazy, the weak or the cowardly.

Dr. Bob Smith, retired professor of philosophy at Bethel University in Minnesota, says that the existence of sheep is *prima facie* evidence against the theory of evolution (K. Hughes). There's no way, Smith argues, sheep could have continued through the aeons of the struggle for survival against other species and their many natural predators without human protection.

In essence Jesus says what Isaiah said centuries before when he prophesied about the coming Messiah: "We all, *like sheep*, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (53:6).

Jesus referred to some of these religious officials as being merely hirelings, professional sheep tenders who had no personal interest or investment in the sheep. In times of danger and difficulty they simply took care of their own interests and refused to risk themselves and their own safety and comfort for the sheep they were tending for the owners who hired them (12-13). Worse than the hireling was the false shepherd who entered the sheep pen under disguise in order to raid the sheep and to destroy them for their own profit.

A well-known television evangelist and faith-healer promised his listeners regularly that if they would send to him their prayer requests, and of course, include an offering for his ministry, that he would pray for their healing. His own staff members, out of disgust of his hypocrisy, disclosed to authorities that he was simply ignoring and discarding the letters after his staff removed the money from the envelopes. He's a false shepherd who, now that he's evaded legal problems, continues unabated to fleece the sheep.

In contrast to these who deceived and frightened the sheep, Jesus says he is the good shepherd. He, like a Near East shepherd who owns and knows his sheep, enters the community sheep pen, and by calling his sheep by name, they come out from this mixed flock and gather to his side (3). This is done to this very day by shepherds in the Near East and Africa. In these lands, sheep are often kept in a community pen/corral, where flocks owned by different farmers, are herded together. But when the shepherd comes to take his sheep to pasture, they recognize his voice and separate themselves from the other sheep by following him. Our shepherd, Jesus, comes to rescue us and set us on the right path.

Pastor Kent Hughes writes about some friends of his vacationing in England. They were in Shakespeare country, the Cotswolds. "One afternoon they decided to take a drive into the back country. As they navigated a country road, Wyngarden, a medical doctor, noticed a flock of sheep. One of the sheep was away from the rest of them, and he noticed that it had all four of its feet up in the air. He assumed it was dead. But as he drove on a little further he began to reflect, 'I'll bet that is a cast sheep.' He and Clem discussed the matter a bit and decided to turn around to investigate, only to discover that the sheep was fat, pregnant, unshorn, overloaded with wool, and lying on her back and bleating urgently for help. The task took both of their efforts, but they managed to get that poor ewe back on her feet, and when they did get her up, she staggered around like a drunken sailor. They steadied her, and Dr. Wyngarden massaged her legs to get her circulation going. Finally," says Pastor Hughes, "she bleated her thank you and wandered off toward the flock."

Apart from Jesus' rescue work on our behalf, we're spiritually as helpless as that "cast down" sheep. We read in Matthew 9:36 that Jesus was moved with compassion as he looked on a crowd, seeing they were like sheep without a shepherd. The phrase "moved with compassion" means literally to have a churning stomach, to be pained over someone's plight. Jesus knows our danger and our desperate need and absolute helplessness to save ourselves and be prepared for life and eternity. In his coming to earth and taking on himself human flesh, Christ the Son came to do his work of correcting lost people like you and me. Through his suffering and his death on the cross, Jesus was able to rescue his "cast down" sheep.

As Jesus' sheep we continue to hear his voice and we keep on following him. This isn't the picture of a one-time decision for Christ. This is the picture of

sheep, eternally chosen, and living in a close, dependent love relationship with the Good Shepherd. Jesus says he knows his sheep and his sheep know him just as the heavenly Father knows him and he knows the Father. Only grace can enable us to so know Jesus. We may well know Jesus better than we think we do (Hughes). One thing's for sure: he knows us better than we think he does. Psalm 139 tells us he knows our thoughts and words even before we form and express them (15-16). And he knows our needs.

The Good Shepherd delights in us and desires to give us more than we enjoy. God has rich blessings for us each day to which we are oblivious. Instead of his peace and joy we settle for fretting, anxiety and spiritual depression. Instead of a selfless life of losing ourselves in loving service and deep relationships, we're content with too little.

The children of a former, dearly loved couple gave both of their obituaries by saying their parents lived a long but also a "complete life." Jesus said he came to give us an abundant, complete life. What does that mean? Does that apply to a young child who tragically dies of cancer? What about a gifted servant of God whose fruitful life is cut short? And is a complete life restricted to those who enjoy long life, good health, prosperity and peace, or can it include those in lands of warfare, poverty and rampant disease?

Several years ago some friends took us on a tour of the Corrie ten Boom Museum in Haarlem, The Netherlands. The tour guide reminded me of the "full and meaningful life" of Corrie I had seen in the Billy Graham movie, *The Hiding Place*. As the daughter of a Haarlem watchmaker, Corrie devoted the best years of her life providing safe haven for Jews fleeing Nazi genocide. The tour guide spoke of how she delighted in living by faith and taking seriously God's promises to provide. She experienced continuous miracles of God's provision for those to whom she ministered. And Corrie, said the tour guide, enjoyed seeing how God delighted to honor her faith and trust. "God loves to do things for those who put him to the test with their faith." And what a life she lived! She never married and never had great wealth. But what a life and what an impact! I'm sure it was a better life than she ever dreamed of. Eternal life by definition is the life of God and of his kingdom, which begins at the moment of rebirth and continues through eternity.

Unlike his enemies who stole from, led astray, and disregarded the sheep, Jesus is the good shepherd who guards his sheep and as the gate for the sheep he gives protection from thieves and robbers, i.e. anyone and anything that would harm our faith. The thieves of life may harm or even kill, damaging our outward circumstances. But the good shepherd will not permit Satan and his lackeys to touch our relationship with God or interrupt our fellowship with Jesus. In fact, tribulation serves only to drive us deeper into the arms of our good shepherd.

A great preacher at Westminster Chapel in London was G Campbell Morgan. He related in a sermon on our text that it was his privilege to cross the Atlantic on board ship to America with the great Old Testament scholar, Sir George Adam Smith. Morgan related, "I shall never forget the fascination of that voyage, as he talked of those eastern lands he knew so well. One story he told me was this," recounts Morgan. "He was one day traveling with a guide, and came across a shepherd and his sheep. He fell into conversation with him. The man showed him the fold into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls, with a way in. Sir George said to him, 'That is where they go at night?' 'Yes,' said the shepherd, 'and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe.' 'But there is no door,' said Sir George. 'I am the door,' said the shepherd." Continued Morgan, "He was not a Christian man, he was not speaking in the language of the New Testament. He was speaking from the Arab shepherd's standpoint. Sir George looked at him and said, 'What do you mean by the door?' Said the shepherd, 'When the light has gone, and all the sheep are inside, I lie in that open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door.'" For those who choose to be Jesus' sheep, his promise is this: "No one can snatch (you) out of my hand" (28).

It's good to always be in the sometimes scary but always secure care of the Good Shepherd, Jesus.