

September 25, 2011 – John 10:1-21

Today we take our final look at the biblical theme of shepherds, shepherding and sheep with the most famous text on this subject, John Chapter 10, where Jesus says "I am the Good Shepherd." It is still such a popular theme that we've all seen familiar, modern images of Jesus as a shepherd on Sunday school curricula or in church paintings. Our challenge today is to move beyond familiarity, triviality and sentimentality and get to, perhaps, what drove the earliest Christians to carve images of Jesus as a shepherd on the tombs of the martyrs and those who died in the first century. We need to get beyond the theme to the reality: Jesus IS the good shepherd.

John 10:1-21

¹“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. ² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and 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 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing 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 And I have other sheep that are not of 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 that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

¹⁹ There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?” ²¹ Others said, “These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (ESV)

- The True Shepherd Comes to His Own
- The True Shepherd Knows His Own
- The True Shepherd Provides For His Own

So first, the True Shepherd Comes to His Own.

When I was in seminary, we had a Pastoral Theology Class on liturgy and special services. Typical stuff. One of the assignments was coming up with an order of service for a funeral. When you do this, you start to think of passages that speak of hope, overcoming death, the resurrection – you know them: Romans 8, 1st Corinthians 15, Psalm 40, Revelation 21. But the professor said, "You've missed the obvious. Almost everyone who knows their bible – and it's

just as likely among those that don't, but want a church funeral – everyone will ask you to preach on Psalm 23.

That image of the shepherd, Tim Keller says, goes so deep, it's so personal in ways that some other passages are theological, the image summons up a shepherd who will take you to calm places, one who will restore your weary, achy heart, the one who provides complete safety and deep satisfaction and peace.

In other words, the images in Psalm 23 are so properly basic, so heart-foundational, that these are the very things we as human beings are seeking all the time. These are the very things all people throughout the world look to build into their lives, their home life, into their friendships and love relationships. Warmth, safe places, love, security, peace and deep satisfaction. The psalm quietly, simply, personifies and opens up our deepest yearnings and longings.

In fact the desires for these things are so universal, and run so deep, that many of us are looking for these things in places where they simply cannot be found. You're driven to find a person or a place or a position in life that will give you what this shepherd in Psalm 23 delivers. And for a lot of us, it's just *this* list of longings that shapes our lives, determines our decisions and directions. You will look for it and think you've found it in another human being, or in a human institution, OR you will try and be these things to yourself – always choosing the peaceful, the secure, the thing that will give you the most satisfaction in the moment.

Jesus takes all of those longings and desires that are universally common, and says, "Here I am. I am *all* of those things."

We won't take time to read it, but just before chapter 10, Jesus has met a man who was born blind. He is *not just* a man who was blind, but he also symbolizes every fear that accompanies all of those hopes and desires: Being blind. Being in the dark. Prone to wander simply because we do not see. Jesus heals this man so that now he *does* see. And he does it right in front of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who believe *they* are the institution – they are the gatekeepers of true religion – who should dispense peace and comfort. They believe *they* are the true shepherds. And in verse 22, it says that the Pharisees put this man *out* of the temple, out of the sheepfold. Jesus brings him in; they put him out.

But Jesus says, "I am the Shepherd. I am the heir to the royal title in Psalm 23. I determine who my sheep are. You haven't sought this man out, you didn't care for him. You didn't offer him hope, comfort and safety... so I will rescue my people so they will not be food for you. I myself will rescue them, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, one by one." And they are offended. They weren't consoled by this picture of Jesus as the shepherd that would provide them with green pastures – they ask in v. 40, "Are *we* then blind?!!" And in his own way, Jesus says yes, because he is claiming for himself this royal title – the Lord – because every believer has been taught to say, "The Lord is my shepherd." They're furious because they know that Jesus has just proclaimed, "I am God. I *am* that shepherd!" They are furious because in chapter 9:38, Jesus accepts the worship of the man who now sees, which no prophet or apostle would dare do. Even angels would not accept worship.

It's an amazing and astonishing claim. Even if you already know that Jesus is the shepherd. Because my sense is that most people today have not really considered what Jesus, *as* shepherd, really means. Not really.

Because the world is *seeking after* soul restoration, people want never to fear any evil, everyone I know searches for comfort and a cup of joy that overflows. But Jesus brings it *to* you. The true shepherd *comes to his own*.

Have you noticed how other religions leave children out? In other religions you have to study very hard, reach greater levels of insight and enlightenment. You have to be a self-feeder, and that takes maturity to reach those levels of spirituality. But the bible says that this shepherd *stands among* the little children. He seeks *them* out and even tells the adults to be *like* the little children.

And this is essential for us to understand: Jesus says be like these little children because children know that they are frequently helpless and that there are people in their lives who are *everything* to them. Essential to living.

I was in a coffee shop this week, and a mother of two children just went around the corner to see something posted on the wall and one of the children just wailed an ear-shattering shriek. Why? Because his mother is everything to him, and he couldn't find her.

Since the fall we don't have a radar to find the Good Shepherd. If anything, our radar is damaged by the fall. We can't find the shepherd on our own. Which is why, just like a child is dependent on his mother searching him out and comforting him, WE are dependent on the Good Shepherd finding us. Over and over again in John's gospel we hear Jesus teach that it's not our coming to Christ, but his coming to us, that saves us. It doesn't depend on human decision or the will of man but on God. No one can come to the father except by him who draws us. (PAUSE)

There is a danger that is unique to sheep. Shepherds call it "cast down." It has to do with a sheep that cannot regain its feet.

One writer explains it this way:

A heavy, fat, or long-fleeced sheep will lie down comfortably in some little hollow or depression in the ground. It may roll on its side slightly to stretch out or relax. Suddenly the center of gravity in the body shifts so that it turns on its back far enough that the feet no longer touch the ground. It may feel a sense of panic and start to paw frantically. [T]his only makes things worse. It rolls over even further. Now it is impossible for it to regain its feet."¹

Sheep, you see, are utterly helpless. And have you ever noticed that you never hear about wild sheep? We have wild horses, wild dogs, wild cats. Why not wild sheep? Because when sheep wander off, they don't merely get lost. They die. They're defenseless. That is why there was no

¹ Philip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), p. 61.

sharper image of tragedy for the ancient mind than "sheep without a shepherd." The very existence of a sheep depended on the shepherd and his twenty-four-hour-a-day care.²

One of the things that Jesus is saying here is "without me, you can do nothing." You are spiritually helpless. We love, you see, the image of a Good Shepherd – we'd carve it on our gravestone or have it preached at our funeral – but we hate the idea that we are both down cast and cast down. We hate the idea that we are essentially as helpless as a sheep on its back, legs flailing in the air. And that we need someone to *find us*.

Can you admit the truth of this – that without him you are lost? That we are all spiritually impotent? That without him you are nothing? If you're like me you think that you're "good enough, smart enough, and doggone it, people like me." That about all you might ever need is some coaching, some advice, an occasional counselor. A guru on retainer. But Jesus says that life apart from him is death. You don't merely need someone to guide you, but someone who will find you.

Are there areas of your life where you have excluded, walled off, avoided the shepherd-king? Areas of your life where you'd really rather he not go? Where you say, I don't need you? It's absolutely critical that you see that the relationship of the Shepherd to the sheep is of constant and comprehensive intimacy. There is no part of your life from which he can be excluded. Your thought-life, your politics, your body, your friendships, your judgments, your profession, your family, your finances, your free time. Are you willing to let him into and even THANK him for what he is doing in those areas of your life? If you can't, he is not your shepherd.

We have to move on, but let me illustrate it this way: In Jesus' day, people didn't have bank accounts, and therefore there were no safety deposit boxes or bank vaults. Their wealth was measured in cattle or sheep, not in pieces of colored paper.

But security against theft was still very important. So every town and village had the *equivalent* of a bank, namely the sheep pen; an enclosed space where the animals could be looked after, with high walls and a gate. Beside the gate or perhaps even lying down in its entrance was a guard – that way a thief would almost by necessity have to wake the gatekeeper. Bona fide shepherds would of course recognize the guard and be recognized by him. They would be allowed through the gate to call to their own flock. Now to the uninitiated, this would look like an insoluble problem for the shepherd – no bank account numbers, right, and no brands on the sheep. But the shepherd would begin to talk to his sheep in a characteristic sing-song way to which only *his* sheep would respond, and in this way he would separate out his flock, and they would follow him out to pasture.

On the other hand, anyone who tried to climb over the walls to get in was obviously up to no good. They were out to steal the sheep or to slaughter them. As Jesus puts it, they were thieves and robbers. The only legitimate way into the sheep pen was through the gate.

² Dr. Robert Smith, former professor of philosophy of Bethel College, once said that the existence of sheep was *prima facie* evidence against the theory of evolution. There is no way sheep could have survived! Hughes, R. K. (1999). *John: That you may believe*. Preaching the Word (262–264). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.

His point is that he enters through the right door as the rightful owner. The Gatekeeper is God who has elected to open up the sheepfold to this shepherd and makes him also the singular gate, so that Jesus can say, "*I am* the door, *I am* the gate."

And this takes us to our second point

- The True Shepherd *Knows* His Own

Even though sheep may be stupid, they know their master's voice. Palestinian shepherds named their sheep according to their characteristics. One might be called "Long Nose" or "Black Ears" or "Fluffy."

Now this means that Jesus – who says in v. 3 that he calls us by name – knows us just as well as he knows his Father—with *intimate* knowledge. This is one of the most staggering promises to be found anywhere in Scripture. How does the Father know the Son, who is one with him? There could be no more dramatic expression of intimacy than how the Father knows the Son. But incredibly, Jesus says, "I know my sheep ... just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." There could be no knowledge more intimate than his knowledge of the Father, and there is no knowledge more intimate than that which he has of us!

Friends, when you call Jesus your shepherd, you have to wonder by what name he calls you. He knows your personal sheepness. Remember how he saw Nathaniel under the fig tree? Or how he knew all of the men that the woman at the well had had? By what characteristic does he know you? I sometimes wonder if he calls us some of the things we would not want to be called. It is quite possible he affectionately calls us "Moody." "Gossip." "Grumpy" or "Insecure," "Fearful" or "Faithless." God knows the foolish thing you will do next week, next year, next decade.

Now notice again, "shepherd" is not the only image you've got here. Even before Jesus says, "I am the shepherd," Jesus says, "I am the gate." It's the claim of Jesus that he is the only way that you can know God and find reconciliation with God. He says it in v. 9: "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture." He is *the only way in* to get to the shepherd who will pasture you, to know God. He is the way that you receive comfort and receive his presence and receive eternal peace. He says it again in v. 11 when he says that "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, and once more, from the opposite side, when he says to the Pharisees in v. 26, "but you *do not* believe because you are *not* part of my flock. *My* sheep hear my voice, and *I know* them, and they follow me."

This is, friends, one of the hardest teachings of the bible. He is the only gate, the only door, by which humanity can reach the peace. This is Jesus saying very specifically "there are *not* a lot of gates to get to God, and in fact his claim is that he is the *only* and exclusive way to God. You will not know him if you don't enter through him.

And don't miss Jesus' larger point: Anyone or any religion that claims that they are or they have another way to God is not only, sadly, in error, but rather they are thieves and robbers. False teachers, false prophets, false messiahs, false religions, and non-religions alike, they are not the gate, but rather they climb over the fence. And they are not the shepherd, but they are hirelings –

like hired hands – who come into destroy or take off when things get hard. They are simply in it for themselves. Hirelings say, when the wolves come, "My life is worth more than these sheep; I'm out of here." Jesus never takes off when it gets hard – Jesus intends to do his work to save to the very end, which he knows will be hard, and will lead to the laying down of his own life.

Jesus is distinguishing himself here from the message of both false teachers who teach another gospel, and the legalists who say do the law, and you will live – they are both "thieves and robbers," Jesus says, because it takes away from the grace of the Good Shepherd.

- The True Shepherd Provides For His Own

Now look, we spoke of how Jesus is not a hireling. He is not in it for himself. But *why is he* the saving Shepherd-King?

Remember how we spoke of sheepfolds as being the bank of the typical Middle-Eastern town? Well for a shepherd, his flock WAS his wealth. The sheep were his savings and everything he owned except the clothes on his back. And sheep, as helpless as they are, are also among the most valuable. That's why it's actually possible that someone might leave 99 sheep behind with a pal to go off in search of one. It's why Jesus illustrates the false teachers and Pharisees as robbers and thieves. Because every single part of the sheep was valuable. You obviously have the wool, the skin, the meat. Everything. Sheep skin made the best water and wineskins. The sheep ARE the shepherd's treasure.

Do you see what Jesus is saying? "I'm not in it for the money, I'm in it for you. People who are hired hands will run when there is real danger. But I own you. You're mine. I have purchased you back. I am redeeming you from, sin and death. I will stay and lay down my life for you. I will," Jesus says, "when danger comes, *become like you*. I will become a lamb myself."

Do you see that? A substitute. This word "for" – "I lay my life down *for* the sheep," can also be rendered "in place of," "instead of."

Now we have to be careful. We are not saying that Jesus needs us. He is the I Am. He is self-existent. But we are saying that Jesus puts his joy and glory ... on you. We call it a covenant because it's like a marriage, where everything that is one person now also becomes the possession of the other. He has bound up all that he is with all that you are. All his joy, all his truth, all his commands, all his honor and glory are now bound up with who you are.

So that when there is danger, he willingly gives up who he is, because you are of inestimable value.

We're sheep, we're blind – we can miss this! We are offended to be called sheep and offended to be told we need a shepherd. But here, the shepherd lays down his life in place of the sheep by becoming a sacrificial lamb himself, so that you can continue to grow in grace and glory.

Look, I know that it doesn't feel that way to many of you. That's why we're talking about it. You wake up, and you don't FEEL glorious. There are days, I know, when you wonder whether any of this is true. Is Jesus really greater than my professor, my smart neighbor, the great philosophers, the scientist who discovered DNA? Your Good Shepherd KNOWS that you feel that way. That we'll ask ourselves, even as long-time believers, "Is this true? And why don't I feel his glory?"

But he provides for us. He makes you his treasure, and he provides by becoming the sacrifice.

How can you be sure? Go back to that picture of the sheep cast down. You were enjoying, you were relaxing, you were content, and then suddenly, your world is upside down and you're flailing.

Look, we sing:

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;*

That is a hymn that *Christians* sing. That is who we are, we wander from the glory he provides.

What does Jesus do?

He provides evidence. He says, "I WILL lay down my life, and I WILL take it up again. I know you'll want tangible evidence, with hundreds of witnesses. And I will give it to you." Four times Jesus says that he lays down his life for the sheep (verses 11, 15, 17, and 18). He wants the Pharisees, who are now plotting to take his life, to hear this: "You can't have it. You can't take my life from me. I can give it, but you have no power over me to take it." They tease Jesus on the cross – "Why don't you call down angels from heaven to deliver you" – but he says "no." He took the cup. He volunteered to take that wrath and lay down his life.

And notice how he says, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again." He wants you to know that when the cross occurs, it wasn't bad luck. How does the Scripture describe his death on the cross? "He ... gave up his spirit" (John 19:30).

You know, if you don't hold to the deity of Christ, if you don't hear the shepherd's voice, you might think, "Isn't it sad that a good guy like Jesus went to the wrong city on the wrong day and was wrongfully killed," just like some people think "if only John Kennedy hadn't gone to Dallas on Nov. 22nd in 1963." No, Jesus is always telling the disciples that he is going into Jerusalem to deliver himself into the hands of sinners, and it isn't until the week before he gets there that Peter says, "You're kidding! I think he really is going there to die!!" But Jesus isn't merely a "good guy." He is your "Good Shepherd" who always meant to die for his people. Death had no claim over him. He is the only, truly, GOOD shepherd. He then lays that one good life down for those on whom death *does* have a claim.

Friends, who else is going to lay down everything else they're busy with for your happiness, comfort and eternal joy? Your boss? Your friends? Your spouse? Your children. Your roommate? And who is going to secure for you peace with God for all eternity? Even if your closest friend, lover or relative wanted to do this, they would be as helpless as you are. The Good Shepherd is willing AND able and he is seeking you, comforting you, shepherding you are all times... if only, or as long as, you hear his voice.

Let's Pray.