

April 25, 2021  
John 10:11-18

Easter 4  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“We Need a Good Shepherd – Now More Than Ever!”**

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”

In the summer before my final year of seminary, our seminary choir was invited to sing and participate in the national convention of the Lutheran Church in America in Louisville, Kentucky. While this was a great honour, it also meant enduring an 18-hour bus ride from Philadelphia to Louisville, with a few stops for dinner and washroom breaks. On the of these stops was in Columbus, Ohio, where we were told that the drivers were being switched and the bus would meet us in a Denny’s parking lot in two hours. After sharing dinner in the restaurant, we waited at the designated place we were told the bus would meet us. We waited, and waited, and waited – but the bus did not arrive. This was before the invention of cell phones, so none of us could call the bus company; but even if we had a phone, no one gave us the company’s phone number. All our luggage was on the bus, and no one was familiar with that city. We continued to wait as it grew dark, not knowing what to do, or where to go, or to whom we could turn to get us out of this dilemma of being stranded in a strange city, far from home and far from our destination. We began to feel like the people for whom Jesus had compassion: *“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* (Matthew 9:36). The bus did eventually arrive (the driver claimed that he got lost, which did not exactly instill confidence in us as we reboarded the bus) and we eventually arrived in Louisville in early hours of the next morning; but the experience of being stranded and lost with no one to turn to for help has stayed with me and has given me a better understanding of why the image of a “good shepherd” has such an important role in Scripture and in the people’s understanding of their relationship with God.

The image of the shepherd in Scripture is drawn from the common knowledge of shepherding in the ancient Near East. Shepherds would have been a common sight, leading flocks to good pastureland in the harsh desert climate of Palestine. Unlike farms in our area that have vast acreage of fertile fields in which sheep may graze, shepherds needed to find grazing land for their flocks, which meant leaving their homes to devote themselves to caring for the sheep in their charge. As is true with people in many jobs and professions, some shepherds were better than others; while

many shepherds took their stewardship of their flocks seriously – caring for them, watching over them, protecting them from predators, even putting their lives at risk for the sake of their sheep – others were not so responsible; they are the one of whom Jesus speaks in today’s Gospel lesson from John:

- “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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.” – John 10:12-13.

The common denominator of these bad shepherds is that their primary concern is for their own well-being at the expense of the safety and well-being of the flocks that have been placed in their care.

The role of shepherds in caring for the flocks in their charge soon became an image for the leaders of the people, the kings who were entrusted with protecting and providing for God’s people. While the Lord established a covenant with David that promised that his descendants would reign over the people of Israel forever (*“Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house ... He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”* – 2 Samuel 7:11, 13), most of David’s descendants proved to be bad shepherds, unfaithful to both the Lord and to God’s people in their stewardship of the care of the people that had been entrusted to them. It is these unfaithful shepherds that the Lord speaks a word of judgment through the prophet Ezekiel:

- “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep ... So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for wild animals. My sheep were scattered, and they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.” – Ezekiel 34:2-3, 5-6.

These bad shepherds are not held accountable for their unfaithfulness when the Lord declares that *“I am against the shepherds, and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves.”* (34:10). In place of these bad shepherds, the Lord promises God’s people that there will be a good shepherd who will take their place, one who will care for these abused and scattered sheep. But instead of sending another human

shepherd, now the Lord promises that the God of Israel will be the one who will shepherd the people that God loves and for whom God cares:

- “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.” – 34:11-12, 15.

The image of God as the good shepherd is the basis for Jesus’ teaching that “*I am* In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus states that “*I am the good shepherd.*” (John 10:11). This is one of several “I am” statements in the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus uses many common images to reveal the true nature of his identity and mission:

- “I am the bread of life.” – 6:35.
- “I am the light of the world.” – 8:12
- “I am the resurrection and the life.” – 11:25
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” – 14:6.

Jesus’ use of “I am” (*ego eimi*) echoes God’s emphasis in Ezekiel that “I myself” will be the shepherd of the people (the phrase literally means “I, I myself”). Jesus specifies that he is not merely a shepherd but a *good* shepherd (*kalos*), an adjective that also has the meaning of “model” or “true”; the true and model shepherd cares for the sheep, rescuing them from the places to which they have been scattered, feeding them, and tending to the weak, the injured, and the lost. By identifying himself as the good shepherd of Ezekiel 34, Jesus thus identifies himself as fulfilling God’s promises and doing God’s work.

The first way that Jesus proves that he is the Good Shepherd is that he “*lays down his life for the sheep*” (10:11). This may be tied to the messianic oracle in Zechariah, in which the death of the shepherd is required so that the flock can be purified:

- “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is my associate, says the LORD of hosts. Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones. In the whole land, says the LORD, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will

say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God.’” – Zechariah 13:7-9.

Jesus draws upon the experience of Palestinian shepherds who may have had to give up their lives to prevent the decimation of their flocks by wild animals, good shepherds who do not leave the sheep and run away like bad shepherds. A good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep is used throughout the Fourth Gospel as a reference to Jesus’ death: *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* (15:13).

After contrasting himself with the bad and unfaithful shepherds, Jesus once again states that *“I am the good shepherd”* (10:14) and identifies another reason for this self-designation in the fact that *“I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father”* (10:14-15). “Know” (*ginosko*) is not a cognitive category but is a category of relationship. The true measure and model of knowledge is God and Jesus mutual knowledge; *“Jesus is thus the good shepherd not simply because of his relationship to the sheep, but also because of his relationship to God.”* (Gail O’Day). The relationship between the shepherd and sheep is one of intimate trust and knowledge; it is so deep that *“the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”* (10:4-5). It speaks of the trust that the sheep place in the shepherds in whom they have confidence will be faithful and trustworthy in all circumstances:

- *“Likewise, my lambs, when they are in sorrow, shame, distress, and death, will learn to know me as their faithful Saviour, who has suffered like themselves, and has even sacrificed my life for them. They will trust in me and look to me for help.”* – Martin Luther.

As Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd who knows his flock and cares for them even to the point of sacrificing his life for their sake, so does he proclaim that his flock is not limited to one people but to all people: *“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.”* (10:16). As Jesus proclaimed that *“I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself”* (12:32), so does he reinforce the will of God *“who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:4), the God who *“so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”* (3:16). The

mark of this expanded flock will be that *“they will listen to my voice”*; to hear Jesus’ voice is the mark of faithfulness to Jesus and his word:

- *“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.”* – 5:24.
- *“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”* – 10:27-28.
- *“I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.”* – 12:47.

The vision of a united flock recalls the promise spoken by God through Ezekiel: *“You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God”* (Ezekiel 34:31). Jesus the Good Shepherd will bring about unity in the flock through his relationship with God and with his death. God loves Jesus because Jesus lives out God’s commandment fully:

- *“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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.”* – 10:17-18.

Jesus obeys the same commandment from God that he passes on to his disciples, to live fully in love: *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (13:34-35). Jesus’ death is the *“ultimate expression of the love relationship that already exists, and defines who he is and how he enacts God’s love for the world.”* (O’Day). As his death on the cross is essential to Jesus’ fulfillment of God’s Will for all people, his enactment of God’s work is incomplete until he returns to the Father through his resurrection and ascension (*“I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.”* – 17:4-5). Jesus reveals God’s will for the world not only in his death but also in his victory over death through his return to God. These verses point to the complete union of God and Jesus in their work (*“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”* – 4:34) a union that receives explicit expression in Jesus’ declaration that *“the Father and I are one.”* (10:30).

- “What heart should not melt with you at this? Who should not love and praise and thank? Who should not joyfully become a servant of all the world, and even less than nothing, when they perceive that God holds them to be so dear and precious, and that he proves and pours out his Fatherly will so abundantly in his own Son’s obedience?” – Luther, 1525.

It is not by accident that the Good Shepherd is one of the most beloved images of our Lord Jesus Christ; it is the subject of numerous works of art (including a painting and stained-glass window in our building). Numerous churches, hospitals, and church-based organizations bear the name of the Good Shepherd (the pastor who married Susan and I served the congregation of the Church of the Loving Shepherd in West Chester, Pennsylvania). It is also not by accident that Psalm 23 is the best-known and most beloved of all the psalms of Scripture, the one portion of the Bible that along with the Lord’s Prayer is best known and beloved. The image that “*the LORD is my shepherd*” and that Jesus himself is the Good Shepherd is the basis for our confident trust and that God is with us no matter how dire our circumstance may be, that no matter how lost and frightened we may become in certain situations that we can sing out in assurance that “*I fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*” Unlike our experience with bad and unfaithful leaders who do not care for us or have our best interests at heart, we know that because the Lord is our Shepherd, because our Good Shepherd loves us so much that he laid down his life for our sake, that we can live every day in trust and hope that “*surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*” (Psalm 23:6).

- “The Good Shepherd ‘calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.’ They follow him ‘because they know his voice’ ... When you call a person by name, that means that you care something for that person as a person. And nothing less than this is a true reflection of the way God looks at people.” – Lesslie Newbigin.

The Good Shepherd has been a source of hope for generations of God’s people; but it may be during these most unsettling times that we may say that we need a Good Shepherd now more than ever. Entering the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult for many people, who are finding it hard to keep hope alive when there is so much fear and uncertainty in our lives. The spike in infections in Ontario and the ongoing shutdowns and restrictions have created an atmosphere in which it is difficult for us to make plans and find hope for the future; we seek comfort and guidance from trustworthy leaders who we know have our best interests at heart and

put the health and safety of the people first. While we continue to pray for government leaders and public health officials, our faith calls us to trust in the Good Shepherd who will abide with us, lead us, protect us, and reassure us that even when we find ourselves in the darkest valleys of doubt and despair we need fear no evil, for we have that blessed assurance that our Good Shepherd will be with us always and lead us to that place where we will dwell in the fullness of God's gracious love forever.

- “Faith is indeed ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’ (Hebrews 11:1). That faith does not yield to death because it knows in its deepest ways that the goodness of God will not fold in the face of the threat of death.” – Walter Brueggemann.

We may feel stranded and abandoned as our choir felt in that parking lot in Ohio; but we live in the assurance that we are in the care of the Good Shepherd who calls us, loves us, provides for us, protects us, and will lead us through these uncertain times in the certainty that “*we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*” (Psalm 100:3). We rejoice that Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd, the shepherd we need and in whom we trust now more than ever!

Amen.