

The Good Shepherd

John 10:1-21

Call: Ps 100 (ESV)

Scripture: Ps 23 (ESV)

I. Introduction

Good morning! Today we come to one of the most famous texts in Scripture, John 10, The Good Shepherd discourse. And we will spend two weeks talking about sheep and shepherds. I continue to be amazed at how the language of shepherd and sheep still connects across cultures and across generations. Even in the hyper-high-tech world of the Bay Area, the image of shepherd and sheep has not lost its captivating power.

I grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania, where we did have a lamb at one point. My sisters confirmed this week that we did name it Lambchops. So, I guess I was a bit of a shepherd when I was eight.

But, the image still grabs us, doesn't it? Even if we've never actually seen a shepherd with a flock of sheep. We certainly see flocks of sheep around, but never really see a shepherd. Still, the most popular Psalm is most likely Psalm 23, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*" But, in John 10, Jesus, comes along and says, "*I am the good shepherd.*" It's another audacious claim. But, in making this claim, it means that those of us who follow him are *sheep*. We, his disciples, are his *sheep*, following him, the *good shepherd*.

How do you respond to being called sheep? When I was a youth pastor, I would begin this talk asking all of the youth what animal would they most want to be. No one ever said they wanted to be a sheep. Why? Because sheep are:

- Known for being creatures of habit, to a fault. They've been known to walk down the same path over and over again to no food, even though green grass is over there.
- If one jumps, they all will begin jumping for no reason.
- If one goes over a cliff, they'll all go over that cliff.
- They have been known to fall over and not be able to right themselves. So they die. It's called casting (Hughes, 263).
- And, they have been known to freeze to death even with a shelter right next to them

Yes. Sheep are famously known to be helpless, easily frightened, easily lost, and very needy. And, for that reason, I didn't know any teenagers that chose to be sheep. Lions, tigers, eagles, even giraffes, but never sheep. Yet, I think all of us know down deep we are more like sheep, than lions or tigers or eagles or giraffes.

A. Context

Once again it is helpful to hear the context for John 10. Last week in chapter 9, Jesus healed a blind man at some point after the Feast of Tabernacles. But do you remember how the story

ended? The shepherds of the blind man cast him out of the synagogue.

Here in John 10, John tells us in verse 22 that we have moved to the Feast of Dedication. Many people saw Dedication as an extension of Tabernacles and on the calendar, they are only 3 months apart. Dedication does bring in the shepherd/sheep theme.

B. The Feast of Dedication

What is the Feast of Dedication? Today, we call it Hanukkah. Now, as I've said, these Jewish feasts were a time to remember what God had done in the past and renew hope for what he would do in the future. What are they remembering in the feast of dedication? Well, in 170 BC, Antiochus Epiphanes, a Seleucid king, came to power over Judea, and he tried to eliminate Judaism. A couple years later, his soldiers attacked Jerusalem, killed thousands of Jews and desecrated the Temple by sacrificing pigs within its sacred walls. What is even worse is that two of their shepherds, high priests Jason and Menelaus, actually joined Antiochus in desecrating the Temple. Here were two of Israel's shepherds deserting God's flock in their time of need.

At this point, Judas Maccabees and his brothers lead a revolt against Antiochus and win! And they rededicate the Temple which initiates the feast of dedication. Now, during the re-dedication, it is said that a miracle of oil occurred. A candlestick was lit with enough oil for only one night. However, it stayed lit for 8 nights. Because of this, the Jewish leaders proclaimed a yearly 8-day festival, the Feast of Dedication.

Now because of the betrayal of those two shepherds, Ezekiel 34 becomes a main text read during this feast. This text is a famous text of God's indictment against Israel's shepherds. Listen to just a few verses, Ezekiel 34:2-6:

Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. 6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. (Ezek 34:2b-6 NIV).

Quite an indictment of Israel's shepherds.

C. Renewing Hope

But, at the end of Ezekiel 34, hope is renewed. Listen to how God speaks. He says, *"I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered..." (Ezek 34:11b-12).*

So the feast of dedication remembers those historical events and renews hope in God, the great shepherd, returning someday to rescue his sheep.

Now we're ready to enter our text today, John 10, beginning in verse 1.

II. The True Shepherd (1-6)

1 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the gate 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. (ESV)

A. The Parable

Jesus begins with a parable about true and false shepherds. There are true and false shepherds, and we need to understand their characteristics and how they interact with their sheep. Jesus begins by highlighting four distinguishing characteristics between true and false shepherds.

- **Entry:** A true shepherd enters through the gate of the sheepfold. False shepherds, of course, enter a different way.
- **Relationship:** A true shepherd knows the names of the sheep, and the sheep know the shepherd's voice, implying a relationship. However, a false shepherd would not know the name of the sheep, and the sheep would not recognize the voice.

William Barclay reminds us that in Palestine, sheep are raised primarily for wool. This means that sheep stay with the shepherd for many years, allowing the shepherd time to know each sheep personally. In fact, shepherds will give special names to each sheep, like lambchops. And when called by name, each sheep responds by following wherever the shepherd goes. Even when two or more flocks get mixed, one shepherd will go off to one side and sound a peculiar call which only his sheep know. One by one, the sheep of his flock run to him. Meanwhile, the other shepherd will go off to the other side, and sound his peculiar call. And one by one, his sheep will run to him. There is a relationship between the true shepherd and the true sheep (Barclay, 67).

- **Leadership:** A true shepherd will safely lead the sheep out of the pen. False shepherds enter through a different way either to steal or wound the sheep.
- **Position:** A true shepherd will lead from the front and the sheep follow. Shepherds don't prod from behind, like driving cattle. They are out front. Jesus, the true shepherd, doesn't stand behind us encouraging us to go on ahead. He leads from out front encouraging us to come, follow me.

III. The Gate (7-9)

7 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the gate 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 gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. (ESV)

A. Enclosures

Here, we get probably the least remembered "I AM" statement of Jesus, but it *is* an important statement. He says, "I am the gate." What does Jesus mean by this statement?

Well, in that time period, there were two kinds of sheepfolds: a cave or a pen.

1. **Cave:** If the flock is out in the hills, the shepherd would find a cave for safety that is obviously walled in on 3 sides. But, what about the 4th side? The shepherd would lay down as the gate. Now, if he is laying down as a gate, the sheep now have security. They are now protected from anything getting in, or the sheep wandering out. A cave is one enclosure.
2. **Pen:** Listen to this story: The explorer Sir George Adam Smith was traveling in Palestine one day, and came across a shepherd and his sheep. He fell into conversation with the shepherd. The shepherd showed George the pen into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls, with an opening to get in. 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." George replied, "But there is no gate." The shepherd replied, "I am the gate." This shepherd was not a Christian man, so he was not speaking in the language of the New Testament. He was speaking from a Palestinian shepherd's standpoint. George looked at him and said, "What do you mean by saying you are the gate?" The shepherd said, "Well, when the light has gone, and all the sheep are inside, I lie in the 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 gate." (Hughes, 267)

B. Safety and Security

Jesus says, "I am the gate." We are safe and secure with him. Jesus will later say, "*And I give eternal life to my sheep, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.*" If we are his sheep, no one will ever snatch us out of his hand. We don't need to be afraid because no one will get in and take us. Nothing has the power to remove us from his hands. We are safe and secure with him.

Jesus here is not promising his followers an easy life with no trouble or no problems. He's not promising that no wolves will come. Wolves might still come and still might snarl at us. They might even take a bite out of us. But, the wolves will not snatch us out of his hand. Not even the worst wolf of all, death itself. The good shepherd never deserts his sheep, not even in the valley of the shadow of death. Indeed he becomes all the more personal in the valley.

Have you ever noticed the shift in pronouns in Psalm 23 from third person to second person, from "he" to "you?"

- 1 *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*
2 *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*
 He leads me beside still waters.
3 *He restores my soul.*
 He leads me in paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.

[Then the shift]

- 4 *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*
 I will fear no evil,
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff,
 they comfort me. (ESV)

In the valley, the Shepherd's presence becomes even more precious and personal. There is no greater security. We are held in the hand of the "I AM," in the hand of the one who laid his life down for us. And nothing has the power to snatch us out of his hand. There is no greater security.

IV. The Good Shepherd (10-11)

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. (ESV)

A. The Good Shepherd

As we all know, verse 10 is one of the most famous verses in all of Scripture, and, I'll come back to it in a moment. But in verse 11, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd."

- Over against those selfish shepherds from Ezekiel 34,
- And, over against those high priests who betrayed their sheep back with Antiochus Epiphanes,
- And, over against those Religious Authorities from chapter 9 who threw out the formerly blind man,

Jesus says, "*I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.*" His timing is impeccable again. And, four months from now at the Passover Feast, at the exact time that the Passover lambs were being offered up on the altar, the Good Shepherd will offer himself up on the cross.

I think we can paraphrase Jesus' claim like this:

"I am the good shepherd of Ezekiel 34. I have come to feed my flock, to seek the lost, to bring back the scattered, to bind up the broken-hearted and to heal the sick. The hope you are celebrating in this feast that God himself will come to be your shepherd has been fulfilled. And I am the fulfillment. I am the *good* shepherd.

B. “Kalos”

The word for “good” here is the Greek word “kalos,” which means even more than good. Jesus is more than a skillful and efficient shepherd. Jesus is the “kalos shepherd,” which means more along the lines of “noble with a sense of loveliness, kindness and graciousness” (Barclay, 72). Jesus is “the noble shepherd.” He will not betray his sheep. Out of his great love and commitment, he will lay down his life for the sheep.

C. Abundant Life

And, it is in his death that abundant life becomes possible, John 10:10. How? Well, it is in his death that sin, evil and death are conquered. He sets us free from sin and evil by paying the ransom price. We are free indeed! He conquers death which means we no longer need to be afraid of death. As Hebrews says, *“by his death he breaks the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil”* (Heb 2:14). The grip of death is now broken and we no longer need to fear it!

But, also, his death sets in motion the outpouring of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit which abides in his sheep. The Holy Spirit, the presence of the very life of the living God, with us and in us. The blessed preposition in! As one writer says, “The Spirit is no lover of dull conformity and repetitive ceremony. Instead, he is ever animating and revitalizing. Through the Spirit the tired places are renewed, the broken places are healed and the places of despair are filled with hope” (Ringma, 47). Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, nourishes us and leads us in and out to the green pastures so that we will *“not be in want,”* as King David prayed so many years before in Psalm 23.

Yes, the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, promises an abundant and flourishing life for us. To us sheep who cannot sustain ourselves and can’t find life for ourselves, he promises to give us all we need to be fully human, fully alive.

And, the good shepherd is also the deeply personal shepherd, verse 12.

V. The Deeply Personal Shepherd (12-18)

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.” (ESV)

A. Hired Hands

Shepherding in the first century was hard work. Shepherds would therefore hire others to help them. These hired workers were generally viewed negatively, because they were working simply for pay. There was no personal connection to the sheep. As Jesus says, *“They care nothing for the sheep” (13)*. In a hired worker’s eyes, the sheep were expendable. And because they are in it only for the money, a hired worker would simply save himself from any threat. Therefore, at the very moment the hired worker is required *is* the exact moment he fails to perform.

Apparently enough shepherds had trouble with hired hands deserting the flocks in the 1st century, that Jewish law laid down very detailed regulations for these workers. For instance, if just one wolf attacks the flock, the hired hand is obligated to defend the sheep, even with his own body. But, if two wolves attack, this is an unavoidable accident. In this case, the hired hand is permitted to run for his life.

B. Jesus Cares

Jesus never runs for his life, even when two or more wolves attack! Even when Roman soldiers attack. Even when the entire Jewish Sanhedrin attacks. That’s because he’s not a hired hand. He’s the true and noble shepherd. For us sheep who cannot sustain ourselves and cannot find life for ourselves, he cares deeply for us. He knows the sheep and the sheep know him. Jesus has a deeply personal and intimate relationship with the sheep, a relationship as intimate as his relationship with the Father.

At this point, Jesus makes his good shepherd claim again, but this time, he changes the pronouns. He doesn’t say that the *good shepherd* lays down his life. He says, “I lay down my life for the sheep.” It is because Jesus knows his sheep personally and is committed to them that he lays down his life for them.

Jesus, the good shepherd, desires the kind of relationship with you and me that he and the Father have. There is no more intimate relationship in the entire universe than that one! That relationship has existed since even the beginning of the world and will exist forever. And, Jesus says that is the measure of the intimacy that he desires to have with us, his sheep! He *is* the deeply personal shepherd.

VI. The Response (19-21)

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)

Our text concludes with the positive and negative responses from the Religious Authorities. Regarding the negative, this is the fourth time in the Gospel that Jesus has been accused of having a demon, all in the last three chapters (7:20; 8:48, 52). But, it’s what’s left unsaid which draws our attention. These false shepherds “say what Jesus is not, but they make no attempt to say what he is” (Morris, 458).

Regardless, there is a growing intensity against Jesus. And, indeed, we are heading toward the good shepherd giving his life for his sheep.

VII. Reflection

So what do we learn from this text? Well, the obvious theme of this text centers on shepherds and sheep.

A. Characteristics of the Good Shepherd

And, we learned a lot about our good shepherd, Jesus. He's the gate who provides access, safety and security for his sheep. He's the good shepherd who desires a deeply personal relationship with his sheep, as he leads them from out front, inviting his sheep to come and follow him to new and lush pastures, to an abundant and flourishing life. And, because he is good and his steadfast love endures forever, he will lay down his life for his sheep.

B. Characteristics of the Sheep

But what do we learn about the sheep? What about us, who want to be lions, tigers, eagles or giraffes, but are really only sheep, who cannot sustain ourselves and cannot find life for ourselves. I think this text raises important questions for us as sheep to consider and reflect upon as we move into our week. I will list 3 that I will leave for you this morning:

1. Who am I following? We all follow someone or something. Who am I following?
2. What voices am I listening to? What voices hold ultimate authority in my life? Can I discern the good shepherd's voice?
3. Where do I go for security and satisfaction? Where do I go for the abundant life?

When we look at the rest of the chapter in two weeks, we will explore what hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd looks like.

Amen.

Benediction (adapted from Rom 8):

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. What, then, shall we say? If God is for us, who can be against us? For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Resources

Barkley, William, *The Gospel of John, Volume Two*

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Burge, Gary, John: *The NIV Application Commentary*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Hughes, Kent, *John: That You May Believe (PTW)*

Ringma, Charles, *Hear the Ancient Wisdom*

Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John*

