

Sermon – April 25, 2021
“I am the Good Shepherd”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Ezekiel 34:4 and John 10:11-18

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Isn't it a blessing to be able to hear and say those words? May the joy of Easter always reside in our hearts and overflow into our living each day. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Before we step into this morning's scripture, there are a few background items that may help us to place these words of Jesus about good shepherds into a biblical context. First, let us recall that the patriarchs were shepherds. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were those who kept flocks, as were Moses and, later, early in his life, so also was the young King David. The idea of a good shepherd is rooted in the history of the people of Israel and grows from the connection of faithful shepherds who heard God's voice and followed Him. Israel's idea of a good shepherd is a shepherd who leads people into an encounter with God. When those listening hear Jesus say he is the Good Shepherd, they would hear him making a claim to be like the patriarchs of Israel or like a great king over Israel in the lineage of David. Those listening would also know that there have been bad shepherds in Israel. These are leaders who led the people of Israel away from following the one true God. These bad shepherds are the leaders whom Ezekiel speaks to when he says bad shepherds are those who “have not strengthened the weak, ... have not healed the sick, ... have not bound up the injured, ... have not brought back the strayed, ... have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness ... have ruled them.” Those listening might also connect Jesus' statement to the scribes and Pharisees, the current leaders of Jerusalem, whom Jesus has told again and again that they are not following God. We also need to be aware of the time of year when Jesus is speaking these words. This is the time of the Feast of Dedication, what we today call Hanukkah. This feast commemorates the time in Israel's history when good shepherds

liberated Israel from the culture of Greece by retaking the temple and rededicating it to God. It is a feast of eight days because the available supply of oil, that was only sufficient to keep the lamp in the temple burning one day, lasted for eight. It is a celebration of a time when good shepherds emerged in Israel once again and led Israel back to the worship of the one true God. When Jesus speaks of good shepherds at this time of year, those hearing his words would connect what he says with this great historic emergence of good shepherds in Israel's history. Those were good shepherds who led Israel away from the influence of the Greeks and back to the worship of the one true God. Finally, in this scripture we find one of the nine "I am" statements contained in the Gospel of John. In John's Gospel, each of these "I am" statements spoken by Jesus gives us insight into who Jesus is. They are each a key revelation of what God is accomplishing through Jesus. Here, Jesus tells us he is the Good Shepherd. Those listening who hear this claim in the context of all of this background would be hearing Jesus making a claim that he will be a great leader like one of the patriarchs, a great king like David, an emerging leader like those who led Israel out of the pitfalls of another culture, and that he will be a good shepherd who will bring Israel back to following the one true God.

Notice the wording of Jesus' statement. He says, "I am the Good Shepherd." He is not one among many, he is *the* Good Shepherd. This is a singular idea. Even though Jesus is speaking in terms of what the people understood about those who keep sheep, Jesus' comments have little if anything to do with those on the hillsides around Jerusalem who are watching over sheep. Jesus' revelation in this statement is another key aspect of who he is as the Son of God.

Notice that Jesus will repeat this statement about being the Good Shepherd twice in this section of scripture. Each time he will follow his words stating he is the Good Shepherd with an explanation of what he means. Following the first time he makes this claim, Jesus will make the point that he is the owner of the sheep and not a hired hand. This is a comment about the current religious leaders in Israel whom Jesus here calls hired hands. He tells those listening that a hired hand will not place his life in danger to protect the sheep. The hired hand does not love the sheep. The hired hand is only seeking to be paid and is not interested enough in the sheep to sacrifice himself to protect the sheep from the hazards and attacks the sheep experience in the wilderness.

The second time Jesus states that he is the Good Shepherd he follows his words with a focus on the sheep. Jesus knows his sheep and the sheep know him. They know his voice and

they will come to his voice. I know I have shared this story before, but I will use it again. When our youngest daughter, Rachel, was in high school, she raised 4-H sheep, and in the spring of each year they were sold. When the sale was complete, all of the sheep the kids had raised were placed in the same pen to be resold the next day at market. Our oldest daughter had just returned late that evening following her exams at Virginia Tech and did not arrive in time to see the sale, but wanted to see Rachel's sheep. Kay and I took her down to the pen to show them to her, and as we stood at the front of the pen and talked, two sheep left the group and came forward and stood looking at us. These were the two sheep Rachel had raised. They knew the sound of the voices they heard talking and came forward. They knew the voices of those who cared for them. For me, it was one of those moments that becomes locked in my mind as what I had read in scripture I experienced in life. As Jesus states, his sheep know him and he knows them. They respond to him, they believe in him, they follow him. It is a key element of this concept of the Good Shepherd. His sheep know his voice and respond to him. Sheep have the responsibility to learn the voice of their shepherd and follow him. They can choose to stay with the larger flock in the fold and trust the voices of other shepherds, wise and evil, or they can learn the voice of the Good Shepherd, trust him, and follow his leadership into green pastures. There is a question here for us as sheep, "Do we know the voice of the Good Shepherd, or are we unable to recognize his voice among the many voices of 'false shepherds' that call to us?" We, as sheep, must learn to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd and to follow him only. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life. The voice of false shepherds can be very seductive, but we must become diligent in our efforts to learn the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Another characteristic of the Good Shepherd is that he knows the Father and the Father knows him. This is the fundamental love relationship between the Father and the Son. This is a relationship of "perfect love where both parties receive to the limit what can be received and give without bounds what can be given." (St. Teresa of Aviva, *The Way of Perfection*) This is the relationship that humanity once had with God in the Garden of Eden when humanity was in relationship with God. That relationship was marred and broken by our sin. This is the relationship that the Good Shepherd will bring his sheep into once again. The Good Shepherd will lead his sheep, those who recognize his voice, into the relationship he shares with his Father.

Also notice that the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep. He will not allow the wolf to come and attack and scatter his sheep. The Good Shepherd will take his stand in the

gate of the fold and defend his sheep from all who would attempt to take them away. He is one who is willing to die for his sheep if necessary. No risk is too great, no price too high for the Good Shepherd to pay to keep his sheep from harm. A shepherd who loses his life will not be able to defend his sheep. If he is killed, he will no longer be able to keep them safe, but the Good Shepherd will give even his life so that his sheep are protected.

Notice what Jesus tells those listening to him, that he has other sheep that are not part of this fold. These other sheep he must also bring into his flock, into his care, and into the relationship of love he has with the Father. Those listening are Israelites, but Jesus tells them there are others he will bring into his fold. The Good Shepherd will go and bring from all the nations all who will listen to his voice. This is all who are his sheep, all who believe in him, that there may be one flock and one Good Shepherd.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd will pay whatever price is necessary that his sheep, those who hear his voice and recognize him, may enter into the loving relationship he has with the Father. Don't read this as, because Jesus will lay down his life for the sheep God loves him. Read this as, because the Son so loves the Father, he will do the Father's will out of that love; the Son willingly will lay down his life for his sheep. This goes beyond defending the sheep from the wolves. It is paying the price that only the Good Shepherd can pay as the perfect sacrifice for the redeeming of his sheep. The Good Shepherd will lay down his life so that his sheep may be reconciled to the Father. The Good Shepherd will pay the price so that his sheep may enter into the relationship that he has with the Father. The Good Shepherd will pay the price so that his sheep may be children of God. Yet, even in death, the Good Shepherd will not leave his sheep unprotected.

Jesus tells those listening that he has the power to lay down his life and the power to take it up again. This is a command from the Father. The way this idea is normally found in scripture is that Jesus was raised from the dead by the Father, but in John's Gospel, since John's understanding of the Father and the Son is that the Father and Son possess the same power, there is little difference in whether the raising of Jesus from the dead is done by Jesus or by the Father. It is the same, as they are equal. This is a glimpse of Trinitarian thought, and it is how John understands that Jesus has the power to take his life up again. The power of the resurrection is an action of the Father and of the Son. Resurrection completes the death of Jesus, and it allows the Good Shepherd to not leave the sheep unprotected but bring them to eternal life.

Similarly, the idea of a command from his Father in John's Gospel is the same as the will of the Father. This is another expression of the love between the Father and the Son. Because of this love, the Son will embrace the mission of the Father and be obedient to it even unto death, death on a cross. It is this steadfast love that we see between the Father and Son, the Good Shepherd, that brings humanity to life.

We need to ask ourselves, "What does the Good Shepherd mean for us today?" Let me suggest a few ways that the Good Shepherd is relevant to us today. First, if we will learn to hear the Good Shepherd's voice, we will be led into the relationship that he has with the Father. If we will trust our lives to Jesus and follow him, obey his commands, and trust him, he will lead us through the wilderness that surrounds us and seeks to destroy us by swallowing us up, and will bring us into green pastures that bring abundant life. This is an invitation to trust our lives to Jesus and follow him. We will follow him through difficult places on our journey. We will be confronted by wolves who are seeking to scatter us, but if we will follow the Good Shepherd, we will be brought into the relationship he has with the Father. We will experience what it means to be a child of God.

Next, we must learn the voice of the Good Shepherd. Other shepherds, the voices of the world, are voices that promise easy, shorter, or better ways to green pastures and will be heard in our life. The promises these voices make will sound easier than the command of the Good Shepherd to love one another. But we must learn this voice. We must spend time in prayer, talking to and listening to Jesus the Good Shepherd speak, so that we might discern his voice in the midst of all other voices we hear. We need to read the words that witnesses to the Good Shepherd left, seek to hear his voice in those words, learn to recognize what is consistent with those words, and then order our lives and diligently seek to follow the sound of the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Finally, remember that if we have listened to other false shepherds and followed them, we are to turn from following them and cry out for the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is the one who will, "... seek the lost, will bring back the strayed, will bind up the injured, and will strengthen the weak. The Good Shepherd will come for his sheep, he knows them and will seek out the lost and heal their wounds." The Good Shepherd will come for us. We are never beyond his reach and no sin is too great for him to redeem. He is always ready to care for us, to welcome us into his flock, and to bring us into the loving relationship he has with the Father. Jesus has

paid the price and has risen from the dead. The Good Shepherd is in place to protect his sheep for all of eternity.

Pray with me: Lord, we confess that we have heard the voice of other shepherds and have followed them. Lord, forgive us. Hear our cry to you this day. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Come, Good Shepherd, come. Rescue us, heal our wounds, enable us to obey your command to love each other, and bring us into your relationship with the Father for all eternity. Amen