THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10:11-18
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series B)
April 21, 2024
Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND
Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 10, verses 11 through 18. In this gospel lesson, Jesus reveals himself to be the Good Shepherd. In some ways he compares himself to ordinary shepherds. But he also distinguishes himself from them. He is like earthly shepherds, but he is also so much greater. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 10, beginning at verse 11, we read in Jesus' name.

> **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."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.
Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Dear sheep,

We have a Good Shepherd. You might like this very much. I hope you do. After worrying about what you will eat, what you will wear, and where you will live, it can be a great comfort to realize that you have a shepherd who leads you. After falling into many sins and errors, it is a great comfort to realize that you have a Good Shepherd who pulls you out of error and forgives your sins. When we realize that this world is a large and dangerous place, it is a great comfort to learn that we have a Good Shepherd who guides us through it. Everyone needs food, leadership, and protection. And it's better to have a Good Shepherd than a bad shepherd. So you might like this, and I hope you do.

But, like many things in Christianity, we might not like this. Or we might sort of like it, but also sort of not. Because a shepherd might lead us somewhere other than where we want to go or where we think we need to go. And he might feed us with something different than what we think we need. Having a shepherd means that we are not the masters of our own lives. And we might not like this. Even if we recognize that we need some degree of leadership and protection, there will still be areas of our lives where we think that we know best, and we will not want to surrender control to our Good Shepherd.

It's also kind of insulting. If we have a shepherd, that implies, at least, that we are sheep. To be compared to some kind of animal is usually an insult. There are a few animals that are used as

compliments, like if someone says you're a tiger, a fox, or a horse, unless we're talking about the way someone eats. But most animals, it seems, are used as insults, and they usually mean specific things. To call someone a pig means they are filthy in some way. A rat is a snitch or someone with poor character. A snake is sneaky and deceptive. They all mean something specific. And a sheep is a vulnerable and dim-witted follower. To have a shepherd implies that we are sheep. And that means that we cannot protect ourselves and we don't know where to go or how to get there.

But that is what we are. The only thing worse than being a sheep is being a sheep who doesn't think they're a sheep. A sheep who thinks he's a lion will soon become what's left of a sheep.

So let's talk about shepherds. Today, most shepherds keep their sheep in one place all the time. And they bring food and water to the sheep. Maybe they let them roam in a fenced in pasture. But we want to think about ancient shepherds. They were the free range kind.

In the first ten verses of John 10, Jesus talks about how a shepherd would go to the sheepfold in the morning to get his sheep. At night, everyone would put their sheep in a communal sheepfold. The sheep would all sleep there, and you only needed one guy to watch over everyone's sheep. Then, in the morning, all the shepherds would go to get their sheep. They didn't have food there, so the shepherds would have to check their sheep out and lead them to food and water. So each shepherd would call for his sheep, and his sheep knew his voice. So when they heard their shepherd in the morning, and they would go and follow him out. This is what Jesus refers to when he says, "The sheep follow him, for they know his voice" (John 10:4). Then, throughout the day, he would shepherd them. That means that he would lead them to food and water.

In Psalm 23, King David reflected on this when he said,

> "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
> He makes me lie down in green pastures.
> He leads me beside still waters" (Ps. 23:1-2).

To have a Good Shepherd means that he leads us and feeds us. This includes our daily bread. That is, the actual physical food we eat and all the physical needs of our lives. Jesus provides all those things. But, even more so, it's talking about our spiritual nourishment. Our Good Shepherd feeds our souls. And he feeds our souls through the Word of God. "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4). He leads us together here, where we receive nourishment from his Word. He leads us to the Word of God in our homes, including our family devotions and our private devotions. We should all be reading the Scriptures on our own. And if you live with a spouse or children, you should be reading and discussing the Scriptures together. I don't know how your personal or family devotions are. The common answer, whenever you ask someone about this, seems to be, "Well, not as good as it should be." And that's my answer too. Okay, I suppose that means that if you're not very diligent, you're not alone. But like many things that are common to us, that doesn't mean it's good or even okay. We have "green pastures" and "still waters" at our fingertips every day. So we should follow our Good Shepherd's leadership in our homes, so that we would feed on his Word and continue to be nourished. This is like the way a shepherd leads his sheep to food and water.

A shepherd also protects his sheep, within reason, of course. If a shepherd heard the howling of wolves in the distance, he might calmly, but efficiently, lead his sheep in the opposite

direction. Or if the grass is wet the shepherd might lead his sheep away from steep slopes. A shepherd leads his sheep away from danger. This is what it means when we pray, "Lead us not into temptation." We pray that our Good Shepherd, Jesus, would lead us away from those things that might harm our souls.

And a shepherd might defend his sheep from imminent danger. If a wolf approaches, and the shepherd has adequate means of killing or repelling the wolf, he might do so. Or if the shepherd is really just a hired worker, and Jesus talks about this, he might run away. They're not his sheep, so he doesn't lose anything personally if he runs away and lets the wolf have his way. But a shepherd who actually owns the sheep will be more inclined to fight the wolf off. And this is what we ask for when we pray, "But deliver us from evil." Temptations will still come. And the devil will still make attacks on your soul. But we pray that our Good Shepherd would defend us from the attacks and fight off our attacker.

So to have a shepherd means that we have leadership. And I mean true leadership. True leadership is rare. That's because it is extremely difficult. The higher you rise, like in government, for example, leadership becomes more and more difficult, because you have to keep the people happy. I suppose the trick, for many politicians, is to project the illusion of leadership, while pandering to the whims of the people. One politician said, tongue in cheek, "There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader" (Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin).

Or I think of Moses. Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law when the LORD called him. The LORD called him to lead his people out of Israel and through the wilderness. And he did. But whenever things got bad, he nearly lost control of the people, and he needed a miracle of bread from heaven, thousands and thousands of quail, or water to miraculously spring from a rock. Otherwise, he would lose the people.

And I think of King David. He was also a shepherd until God anointed him as king over Israel. The LORD talks about this in 2 Samuel 7. And I don't know how many times I read this passage before I noticed this, but now I think it's kind of funny. The LORD said to David, "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel" (2 Sam. 7:8). You notice that? David was *following* the sheep. They were not following him, but he was following them. And maybe that's just the way earthly leadership usually goes. The leaders follow the people, because we don't really have that ability. We're not God. But when David wrote about his Good Shepherd, he said, "He leads me beside still waters," and, "He leads me in paths of righteousness" (Ps. 23:2-3).

We have a true leader in our Good Shepherd. He does not follow our whims. He does not let us have candy for breakfast, or whatever the spiritual equivalent of that is. He's the kind of leader who insists upon his ways, because he knows his ways are truly best, and he does not lose control.

To some degree, Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd to reveal who he is and how he leads us. But he also separates himself from all the other shepherds of the world. He says, "I AM the Good Shepherd" (10:11). He doesn't even say, "I am *a* good shepherd," but, "The Good Shepherd." There is no other shepherd like him. Even shepherds or leaders that might be pretty good by our standards are not in the same category as our Good Shepherd. He's in a class by himself. He is *the* Good Shepherd.

So what separates Jesus from every other kind of shepherd or leader? We talked about how he's a true leader, and not a follower of the sheep. But the really substantial thing is the way he lays down his life and takes it up again. I mean, think about this. Shepherds don't die for their

sheep. That's the opposite of how it's supposed to go. A normal shepherd lays down the life of his sheep. He might lead them and protect them for a while, but that's only because he intends to make a profit off their flesh.

And we probably knew that the metaphor of shepherd was going to break down before it gets to the point of slaughtering the sheep. But even without slaughtering their subjects, other leaders use those under them for their own benefit. This is pretty easy to see, especially in government and business. Earthly leaders are selfish. They're smart enough not to say it, but we all know that the people at the top use the people under their authority. And these are places where humans exercise authority over humans, not animals. So it seems really backward that a shepherd, a person, would lay down his life for the sheep.

It also seems futile. What happens as soon as a shepherd lays down his life for the sheep? All of the sudden, there is nothing between the wolf and the sheep. He can have his way with them. A dead shepherd is no benefit to the sheep. And I suppose this is why Jesus' disciples couldn't understand when Jesus insisted that he must be crucified. What good would the Messiah be to them if he is dead?

But Jesus does not speak merely of laying down his life for the sheep, but laying it down and taking it up again (10:17). And this is different than simply not dying. To die and rise again is totally different, because laying down his life is how he defeats our enemy. Satan, whom we can think of here as the big bad wolf, accuses us of sin. This was his power. And he had the Law on his side. According to the Law, we are guilty of sin and deserving of death. Satan was right about this. But Jesus, our Good Shepherd, took our sins into himself and died with them. So Satan's power to accuse is taken away. And death, which was the consequence of sin, cannot hold us anymore. Removing Satan's power to accuse is like ripping the teeth and claws out of the wolf.

So Jesus lays down his life, and he takes it up again. So we have a Good Shepherd who is both crucified as an atonement for sin, but who also lives and continues to lead, guide, and protect us. He even leads us through death. We still must die, because we still live in this broken world, with sinful and corrupt souls. But we do not go into death alone. We follow our Good Shepherd into death, because he has been there and has come through it alive, transformed, and glorified. So David wrote in Psalm 23,

> "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil,
> for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4).

We don't go into death, but we go through it, because our Good Shepherd has gone through it. He cut a trail through it. The bars that would hold us there have been broken. We still pass into it, but we will not stay there, because our Jesus passed through it and he will lead us through it.

Dear sheep,

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. And he is your shepherd. He is always near to guide and protect you. He may guide you in ways that you do not like, but always in the way that is best for you. So listen to his voice. That is, listen to the Scriptures. And he feeds you with this very Word of God. It is our spiritual food. Our Good Shepherd has given us the Scriptures to nourish our spirits, guide us in what is right, and protect us from error.

And he is ever present with us. He is here now. When you leave here, he will go with you.

We often wander from his loving protection. But he does not forsake you. He laid down his life as an atonement for your sin. And he took it up again to guide you as your living shepherd. He will guide you through this life. And, as he has already passed through death, he will also

lead you through the valley of the shadow of death and into the house of the LORD forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.