

The Good Shepherd

John 10:1-10

This passage, with its imagery of the “good shepherd,” is highly evocative. When we pause to consider that in the Old Testament God is the shepherd of Israel, we realize that here in John 10 we are standing on hallowed ground. As Jesus speaks these words, “I am the good shepherd,” we are reminded of what God said through the prophet Isaiah (40:10-11):

“See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”

Could there be more comforting words than these? The Lord God Almighty, who comes with great power and strong arms, gathers his people in those arms and carries us close to his heart. He is sovereign and strong and yet tender and gentle.

David, who had been a shepherd in his youth, speaks in deeply personal tones in what is undoubtedly the best known of all the Psalms (23):

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside
quiet waters, he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
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.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

In John 10 our Lord builds on this Old Testament imagery and he applies it to himself. In a culture overflowing with shepherds, literal shepherds who tend flocks in fields and spiritual shepherds who supposedly tend other flocks in synagogues, Jesus stands out. He is the “good shepherd!” He is not like the hired hand who sees the wolf coming and abandons the sheep. He is the Divine Shepherd who:

- Owns the sheep: so we belong to Him!
- Knows the sheep by name: so we can know Him!
- Guards the sheep: so that we are never abandoned!
- Lays down His life for the sheep: but He takes it up again so that we, too, may live!

Here is the perfect shepherd, the very one who is needed for a people who have been wicked, weak, and wandering. And because of His resurrection from the dead, our Lord is here this morning to lead us into those green pastures, beside still waters, and along paths of righteousness.

Now I don't think we can fully appreciate the significance of this passage until we are familiar with the context. In the preceding chapters (7-9) Jesus has been at the Feast of Tabernacles. He has presented himself as the "light of the world" (8:12; 9:5) and he has given a powerful demonstration of this by healing a man born blind. What is the response of the Pharisees, the so-called shepherds of Israel? Instead of rejoicing with this man over his new-found sight, they rudely interrogate him and then throw him out of the synagogue. His crime? He has believed in Jesus and attributed his healing to the divine power of the Master. For this he is thrown out of the synagogue and expelled from the flock.

Now, here in chapter ten, almost three months have passed. Jesus is now at the Festival of Hanukkah, also known as the Feast of Dedication. It was a solemn time during which the people would contemplate the past failures of the shepherds of Israel; that is, Israel's false religious leaders who had led them astray into idolatry, immorality, and bondage.

Now mark this, even though almost three months have passed, there is a literary connection between chapters nine and ten. In chapter nine the false shepherds, the Pharisees, throw the healed man out of the flock. But in chapter ten we behold the Good Shepherd who gathers the flock into the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not throw out, he gathers in! Jesus does not condemn those who come to him in faith, he redeems! And so just as our Lord is the True Vine, he is also the Good Shepherd. We will never have a better shepherd!

Now mark this: In verses 3-4 Jesus says that he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. They follow him because they know his voice. In the Middle East shepherds are often known to carry a short flute and use a repeated tune so that the flock has a consistent auditory cue to follow. Arab shepherds are known to be able to separate their own sheep from larger flocks by using peculiar calls.

During the Palestinian uprising in the late 1980's the Israeli army decided to punish a village near Bethlehem for not paying its taxes. The officer in command rounded up all of the village animals and placed them in a large barbed-wire pen. Later in the week he was approached by a woman who begged him to release her flock. Since her husband was dead, these animals were her only source of livelihood. The officer pointed to the pen containing hundreds of animals and humourously quipped that her request was quite impossible. After all, how could he possibly tell which were her sheep?

She asked that if she could separate them herself, would he be willing to let her take them? He agreed. The gate to the pen was opened and then the woman's son produced a small reed flute. He played a simple tune again and again – and soon sheep heads began popping up across the pen. The young boy continued his music and ended up walking home followed by his flock of twenty-five sheep.¹

1. This story was related by Gary M. Burge in The NIV Application Commentary, John.

There is a powerful lesson in this story. We live in an age and in a culture that is noisy with deceptive voices. It is crucial that we learn to discern the voice of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There is a tragedy unfolding before our eyes. George Barna reports that students he has surveyed do not know where to turn for guidance. Neither do they know how to discern the voice of truth amid the chorus of voices clamoring for their allegiance. When asked to whom they would turn first in times of tension, confusion, or crisis, they ranked their fathers no. 25 on the list! Mothers came in about no. 11! Music and personal friends scored at the top. This is gravely alarming considering the

menu of violence and aggression, and the amoral worldview served up in modern rock music. To quote Gary Burge, “Young people may well look to the wrong leaders when [trying to] come out of the desert.”

But the reality is that many adults respond to false voices as well. At the turn of the millennium the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* reported on a woman in that city who called herself an “intuitive healer.” She claimed to have supernatural power to diagnose people’s illnesses. She could even do it over the phone! What is disturbing is the number of people, both patients and physicians, who relied on her powers. How many sad souls there are who, when groping for a way out of their own personal wilderness, will turn to almost any “shepherd” who offers a way out.² The Good Shepherd is the way!

A British newspaper, *The Observer*, reported on married couples trying to deal with the problem of infertility through a “council of witches.” Pagan “pastors” were making claims to curing infertility in thirty minutes through the use of secret potions and ceremonies. These couples were assigned to make love on ancient, ceremonial stones located around the country.³ What is mind-boggling is that this was given sufficient credence to make it onto the front pages of one of Britain’s most respected newspapers.

2. Reported by Gary Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary*, John.
3. *Ibid.*

Listen people, when someone presents themselves as a “shepherd of the flock,” the first test of their credentials is their faithfulness to the leadership of Jesus. When someone calls out to the sheep, the first thing we want to know is this: does their voice echo the voice of the Jesus we have come to know in the Scriptures? If it does not, then they are a false shepherd.

Look at verses 7-10 with me. Jesus says that he is the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before him – and I would now add that many who have come after him – were thieves and robbers. The tragedy is that they steal not your money – although sometimes that too – but that they steal your soul. They rob those who listen of their lives! But Jesus says that his sheep do not listen to such false shepherds. They know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except by Jesus (John 14:6).

The promise of our Lord is unequivocal. Whoever enters through Jesus will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture. In other words, any man, woman, or child who places their faith in Christ will find freedom and spiritual nourishment. In fact, they will have life and have it to the full!

There are many counterfeits, but there is only one Christ. Do you know how U.S. treasury agents are trained to spot counterfeit money? It isn’t by studying counterfeit money. They spend their time studying real money. They come to know how it feels, how it smells, how it looks. They know the real McCoy so well that when a counterfeit presents itself it is detected immediately.

Jesus is the real McCoy! He is the Good Shepherd. The hallmark of his sheep is that they hear his voice. They follow it. They respond to the music of the Master’s words. They will not follow another. Now let me ask a few questions that have life and death consequences and eternal significance: Do you hear the voice of Jesus? Do you follow where he leads? Do you rely on his Word? Do you obey his commands?

J. Sidlow Baxter puts our Lord in proper perspective:

“Fundamentally, our Lord’s message was Himself. He did not come merely to preach the Gospel; He himself is that Gospel. He did not come merely to give bread; He said, “I am the bread.” He did not come merely to shed light; He said, “I am the light.” He did not come merely to show the door; He said, “I am the door.” He did not come merely to name a shepherd; He said, “I am the shepherd.” He did not come merely to point the way; He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

An unknown author shows the difference between the Good Shepherd and every pretender:

Buddha never claimed to be God. Moses never claimed to be Jehovah. Mohammed never claimed to be Allah. Yet Jesus Christ claimed to be the true and living God.

Buddha simply said, “I am a teacher in search of the truth.” Jesus said, “I am the Truth!”

Confucius said, “I never claimed to be holy.” Jesus said, “Who convicts me of sin?”

Mohammed said, “Unless God throws his cloak of mercy over me, I have no hope.” Jesus said, “Unless you believe in me, you will die in your sins.”

The challenge this morning is straight forward and simple. Let us show ourselves to be His sheep by displaying the hallmark of all true followers of our Lord. Let us listen to His voice, and let us follow Him where He leads.