

Jesus, Our Good Shepherd

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

Pastor Dave Labuhn

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Traditionally, the Fourth Sunday of Easter is celebrated as Good Shepherd Sunday. It is a Sunday when we acknowledge our Lord and Savior Jesus in the same way in which He described himself, as our Good Shepherd. Different readings are appointed for this Sunday. The readings are always taken from the 10th Chapter of the Gospel of John in which Jesus describes himself with the metaphor of the Good Shepherd. Today, we heard from the first 10 verses of the chapter.

Words are important when Jesus uses them, and repetition means they are very important. In our reading, Jesus used the word "door" 4 times in just 10 verses saying that the only way into the sheepfold is through the one door and that one door is Jesus Himself. Jesus is using this metaphor to tell us the way to heaven. He also tells us that He is the only true shepherd of the sheep because He is the door itself through which the sheep enter the fold. Anyone else who tries to lead the sheep is a pretender or, worse, an enemy of the sheep. His words were so confusing to those listening to him that He had to repeat himself, clearly adding in v. 11 that the Good Shepherd is the one who lays down His life for the sheep. I hope you are not confused by these words.

Some contexts might help clarify what Jesus is saying before we make an application in our lives because, unless I am mistaken, there are few if any sheep, shepherds, or sheepfolds in Ashburn, Leesburg, or even Loudoun County.

Sheep and shepherds had been abundant in Palestine since the days of Abraham. In the time and place that Jesus spoke these words from

our Gospel today, sheep grazed on the open range as they had for centuries. The land had vast areas that were not of much use for large grain crops, but they grew just enough vegetation for sheep to eat. It was in these wild, desolate areas that shepherds led their flocks during the day and watched over their grazing sheep.

Although Palestinian sheep country was not that great for agriculture, the rocky terrain produced a fine crop of stones. Shepherds often used those stones to build sheepfolds. These were enclosures similar to corrals for cattle or horses in our country. The shepherds kept their flocks in them during the night and during bad weather. They were usually built in a valley or on the sunny side of a hill where there was protection from cold winds. Their wall was about 3 feet wide at the bottom and grew narrower at the top. Typically, they were from 4 to 6 feet high, enough to discourage both animal and human predators.

Large stones were used for constructing the outer walls, and on the top, while smaller stones were used to fill the center of the wall. The only way in or out was through a door or gate with an arch at one end. Sharp thorn bushes were placed on the top of the wall as another way to deter wild animals and thieves. Sometimes shepherds would use caves or other natural rock formations for sheepfolds.

As the sun went down, all the shepherds would bring their separate flocks together and lead them into one of these sheepfolds. The sheep would spend the night in the relative security of the sheepfold. Since there was only one gate (or door) into the sheepfold, during the night the shepherds might hire a watchman to sit in the gate as a guard while the shepherds slept. At other times one of the shepherds would sleep in that opening. So, the shepherd became the door of the sheepfold. No predators could get in and no sheep could get out without waking the shepherd. The only way in or out of the sheepfold was through that gate and the shepherd became the door of the sheep. Jesus described Himself as that shepherd who was the door.

In the morning, each of the shepherds from the community came and led his sheep out of the sheepfold to the pastures. You may wonder, how could each shepherd tell which sheep was his and which belonged to a neighboring shepherd? How could you separate all these animals, now mingled together, so each flock followed their rightful owner? The answer to this question is very important to Jesus' metaphor. The sheep self-selected into the proper flocks of their shepherd because they knew the voice of their shepherd when He called them. A shepherd would come to the entrance to the sheepfold and call them by name or talk or sing to the sheep. The sheep in a shepherd's flock knew the sound of their shepherd's voice. That voice meant food when they were hungry, water when they were thirsty, and safety at all times. They followed the voice. The sheep in the sheepfold from other flocks did not know that shepherd's voice and they ignored it. All a shepherd had to do was start talking or singing and his flock would come to him and he would lead the flock out of the sheepfold to green pastures and still waters. Another important point to know about Palestinian shepherds is that they led their sheep. Western shepherds drive their sheep from behind with the help of sheep dogs. Near Eastern shepherds lead their sheep by walking in front of them

The shepherds made sure that the sheep knew their voices. They spoke to the sheep. They sang to the sheep. The sheep grew used to the voice of their shepherd. That voice became a source of comfort and security. This confidence in the voice of the shepherd was life-giving for the sheep.

After preaching a Good Shepherd Sermon at another church, two parishioners came up to me and verified this again. Their children were in 4-H (an organization found mostly in agrarian communities). They raised sheep and brought them to the local county fair to show them and sell them. After their animals had been sold and the fair was over, the family was walking to their car to go home. They happened to pass by the trucks with the animals that had been sold

now loaded on them. As they walked by one of the trucks, they noticed a terrible ruckus in that truck. The animals were jumping up and bleating in the truck. The family was curious about this terrific noise and decided to look in the truck to see if something was attacking the animals. To their amazement, it was their sheep causing the commotion. As they were walking by, they were talking. The sheep heard their voices and wanted to go home with them. They were trying to get out of the truck to follow them home. These folks live in Clark County.

Jesus spoke the words of our Gospel today about the shepherd, the sheepfold, and the gate to it while he was in the temple in October at the Festival of the Tabernacles. It was six months before his crucifixion the following spring.

The people who heard him understood the practical descriptions he gave. They knew what He was talking about. He was accurate. However, there is more to this story. In chapter 9 of the Gospel of St. John, immediately preceding our reading today, Jesus had just healed a man who had been blind from birth. You may remember this as our Gospel reading on the Fourth Sunday in Lent on March 19. Jesus performed this miracle on a Sabbath and that really offended the Pharisees, the leaders of the church. Additionally, the Pharisees found the newly sighted man and ask him about Jesus and what He had done for him. The man praised Jesus and said he was from God. This infuriated the Pharisees even more and the Pharisees excommunicated this man who had been healed because he said that he believed Jesus was from God. They were furious with both the man, now sighted, and Jesus for healing him on the Sabbath.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, went looking for that man and found him in the Temple. The man confessed that Jesus was God. Jesus condemned the Pharisees by declaring that, even though they claimed to have spiritual insight, they were spiritually blind. And because they insisted that they had spiritual insight, their guilt remained.

In His metaphor about sheepfolds, Jesus accused the Pharisees, the religious leaders, who were supposed to be the “shepherds of God’s people, Israel” of being robbers and thieves. He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber,” (John 10:1) When Jesus accused and condemned the Pharisees, Jesus was now a marked man and the Pharisees made plans to kill him.

What does this all have to do with us today? First, our Savior died at the hands of the church leaders who Jesus described in His metaphor as “hired hands” who were supposed to guard the gate and as thieves and robbers because they were leading God’s people to their spiritual deaths.

Robbers and thieves tried to get in the sheepfolds at night and slit the throats of the sheep to kill them and then throw them over the wall to take them away. Jesus accused the Pharisees of teaching unsuspecting and innocent souls that righteousness before God came by fulfilling the Law of God. The Pharisees added to God’s Ten Commandments over 600 additional rules and regulations as part of that Law. The Pharisees often used themselves as proof of that claim by showing others how they were obedient and then, condemned anyone who disagreed with them, excommunicating and executing the two men in this story. Jesus warned us about these types. He is the only gate to heaven.

Spiritually, we are the sheep in this story. Each of us is a sheep. Jesus tells us this clearly. Shepherds, in Jesus’ time, knew their sheep as individuals. Often, they gave them names because of some physical feature. Names like “Brownie” or “Hop along” (if walked with a limp) or “Wayward” or “Rebel” or “Dimples” if they had a goofy grin. Makes us wonder what nickname Jesus has given you.

Jesus our shepherd called us by name in Holy Baptism and knows our names and us as one of His own. He knows us as intimately as a shepherd knows his individual sheep. Now, here is the most

important thing to know and to accept, about being like sheep. Sheep are not too smart and as a result, do not see the dangers around them.

You may not agree that you are like sheep, but Jesus says you are in this Gospel. And anyone who has been around sheep, or who has raised them, knows sheep are gullible and sometimes downright stupid. (Our sister in Christ, June Temme grew up on her father's sheep ranch in Australia. She can give you examples.)

Sheep need someone to nourish, guide, and protect them as live their lives in the world. Left on their own, they are vulnerable and easy prey for predators and thieves who seek to consume and destroy them. Who are these predators: Satan is like a lion who prowls looking for victims to devour; the world around us has predators who want to steal us from Jesus; thieves who want to lure us away from our faith and the safety of the flock of Jesus; we ourselves are our own worst enemy, foolishly wandering away from the safety of our Good Shepherd and ending up in all manner of trouble.

Jesus said you cannot even trust hired hands to serve as substitute shepherds. Hired hands do not really care about the sheep. When the first sign of danger comes, they abandon the sheep. He was talking about false teachers. People, who like the Pharisees, led the innocent people away from the truth and the True Shepherd: false teachers who say you do not need Jesus to get to heaven as long as you are a "good person" in this life; others who say material things are more important than faith, or "goods mean grace"; others who try to convince us that enjoyment is more important than obedience; those who say there is no heaven or hell—when you die, that is the end; people who say Jesus was a great teacher, but He was not God; some who teach that the Holy Supper is only symbolic and not the true body and blood of our Savior in, with and under the bread and wine; others who say Jesus did not perform miracles, that these stories were myths made up to convince people to believe in an unbelievable man; those who say Jesus did not die and remain in the tomb—He was never really dead if he rose on the third day, and He

was only in a coma. All these are robbers and thieves. False in every way and bent on leading the sheep of Jesus' flock away from Him and to their death.

Now, some of you are thinking right now, I am not a sheep. That is not me at all. I can handle myself. We have just finished the National Football League draft of collegiate players. As we heard the names of the professional football teams that called these young men to play for them, did you hear any team names that were sheep? You know like the Detroit Sheep, or the Atlanta Sheep, or the Washington Sheep? Oh, I know there are the Los Angeles Rams, but the implication does not imply docile grazing sheep, does it?

Sheep are what we are, and Jesus has used the right term to describe us. Vulnerable, naïve, our own worst enemies, unwilling and unable to learn from our mistakes, and sometimes downright stupid. We are defenseless and unable to protect ourselves from harm and danger. Spiritually and physically. But, in Jesus' example, the sheep know the voice of their Good Shepherd. They will not follow the voice of strangers. In fact, a strange voice will cause them to go the other way. The voice they trust is the voice of their Good Shepherd. The voice they trust is the one they have known who will be there for them to lead them to refreshing waters and green pastures. The Good Shepherd soothes them with his voice and calms them with his recognition of them. The Good Shepherd knows them by their name. He is the one who will keep them safe even to the point of laying down his life for His sheep. And Jesus did lay down His life for us, His sheep. He died for us on the cross.

We were, and still are, like sheep who go astray. We get ourselves into all forms of trouble because we can become spiritually blind or turn to voices that are not our Good Shepherd's voice. We wander off and can be seduced into following someone or something that is not good for us. Jesus came looking for the man he had healed. He came because He was his Good Shepherd. Jesus died on the cross and was absent for a period of three days, but He rose from death.

And we know *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* When He died, He did not abandon His flock. He came back looking for His flock. First, He came to the ones He first called, His disciples, but later to others who believed in Him. He was there for them. He said, “Peace with you.” When He spoke to them, even though their eyes were clouded by fear, despair, and depression, they recognized His voice, and they were at peace.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He is the door to the sheepfold, the one and only way to the Father. He knows each one of us sheep intimately, by name. He calls us and feeds us with His Word and Sacraments. What makes Him our ultimate Good Shepherd is that He was willing to lay down His life for us sheep even though we did not deserve it.

We know His voice and recognize His voice. We follow Him where He leads us. We ignore the calls of “strangers” because Our Good Shepherd allows us to experience life in Him. Not just an existence but an abundant life. A life that is full and a life that is everlasting.

So, are you listening? Your Good Shepherd speaks to you every day in His Word. He is helping you to learn who He is and why you should follow Him and not strangers. He is leading you because he cares for you with intimacy and commitment that led Him to die for you. He comes to find you and bring you back to Him when you are led astray or wander off. And, He has returned after defeating the predator “Death” to lead you home to Him. Do you hear Him? He is calling you. He is standing at the gate. He is the door that is open for you to enter. He is calling you and saying, “Peace be with you. I am here. You can rest now because I will watch over you and protect you. Trust me.”

He is indeed, our Good Shepherd. Amen.