

Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2021  
“The Good Shepherd” (John 10:11-18)

Jesus said, *I am the good shepherd*. Let’s begin by examining that phrase. What did Jesus mean by declaring himself to be the good shepherd? We know that the shepherding image was used throughout scripture. It was an image with which people could relate because shepherding was a common and well-known occupation. People understood that a shepherd’s role was to take care of the sheep in his flock.

God is depicted in Psalm 23 as the ultimate Shepherd, the one who provides for his people’s needs, who leads us to green pastures and still waters, who restores our souls, who walks with us, even through the valley of death, the one who is always present. Therefore, Jesus was aligning himself with our shepherding God. He, too, is present and devoted to caring for God’s people.

*Shepherd* was also used to describe the kings of Israel, the earthly shepherds who were entrusted with caring for God’s people and leading them in greater devotion to God. Of course, we know that many of them failed in their calling. Instead of drawing them closer to God, they led them away. These shepherd kings were considered evil and unrighteous.

Jesus contrasted himself with those shepherds by calling himself the *good* shepherd. But what did he mean by *good*? There are several words for *good* used in the Bible. The one Jesus used here is *kalos*, which means more than having a pleasing quality. *Kalos* means innately beautiful, inherently worthy, noble, wholesome, in harmony with God.

To help us make the distinction, let’s consider the phrase *good doctor*. By that, we might mean that the doctor is knowledgeable and very proficient in his profession. His ability and skill are what make him good. But by calling him good, we might also be speaking to his character – that he displays warmth and compassion, that he truly cares for his patients, that he is invested in their health and wholeness and actively listens to their concerns. These characteristics place the doctor on another level of *good*. (*kalos*) This is the word Jesus uses to describe himself.

*Kalos* is derived from the Hebrew word used in the creation story from Genesis 1. God looked at the earth and seas and saw that they were good. The vegetation and fruit bearing trees were good. The sun, moon, and stars were good. The living creatures that filled the land, the seas, and the sky were good. God’s creation was good, not just in that it was pleasing or functional, but that it was innately beautiful, perfectly made according to God’s plan, and in harmony with God.

As the good shepherd, Jesus has that innate beauty that is a reflection of God, he is perfect in that he is sinless, and he is in harmony with God as he carries out his mission. He says many times that he and the Father are one and that each glorifies the other. Jesus is good as God is good.

But Jesus is not just *a* good shepherd; he is *the* good shepherd, the one who is inherently worthy and righteous, and the one whose sheep truly are his primary concern. That’s us – you and me. We are the sheep for whom the shepherd is concerned. And there are many ways in which he cares for us.

First, he offers protection. Sheep are very vulnerable. They can't protect themselves. They can only run from danger, which makes them easy prey for other animals. The shepherd is the one who defends them. Sheep are vulnerable in that they don't make good choices. If not for the shepherd, they would eat poisonous plants or drink stagnant water that would make them sick. He leads them to green pastures and nourishing water. And if they somehow get flipped over on their back, they are unable to right themselves. But under the watchful eye of the shepherd, that situation is quickly handled.

We, like sheep, are vulnerable. Sometimes we're preyed upon by others. Sometimes we make poor choices. Sometimes our world seems upside down and out of control. Just think of how vulnerable we've been this past year. But we have a shepherd who protects us.

Secondly, a shepherd offers guidance. A sheep's herd instinct is much stronger than its reasoning. If one sheep would run off a cliff, the others would follow. But the shepherd leads them on a right path. And sheep don't learn from their mistakes. They might get wedged between rocks and have to be rescued, and they next day, they do the same thing. But the shepherd is always there to guide them out of danger.

Sounds a lot like us, doesn't it? We, too, like to follow the crowd – even if it gets us in trouble – because we're concerned with what others are doing and we want to be included. We, too, make the same mistakes over and over again because we're so intent on doing things our way. But we have a shepherd who guides us. Through his Word, the Holy Spirit, and others he places in our lives – he keeps us focused on what is best for us.

Thirdly, a shepherd nurtures. He knows his sheep individually and intimately. He knows their likes, their dislikes, and their personalities. He also knows their needs and is always prepared to meet them. And he knows immediately if one is missing and goes searching for it.

We, too, can sometimes get lost or drift away from the shepherd, but the good news is that our shepherd – the one who knows the number of hairs on our head – will seek for us until we are found. These are the things our shepherd does.

I'd like to make a point about how John structures his gospel, using chapter 10 as an example. In the verses before today's text, Jesus describes himself as the door through which the sheep go in and out to find pasture. He ends that section by saying, *I come that they (the sheep) might have life and have it more abundantly*. That statement is the conclusion to the first part of the chapter. Those who enter through him – the door – will have abundant life.

But it is also the hinge between the first nine verses and the text that is before us today. It sets the tone for his story about the good shepherd and underlies everything he says today. The good shepherd is always leading to abundance. He is always leading to the green pastures, to the still waters, to the table that is set and the cup that is overflowing. It's always about getting to the place of abundance – to that place lived more firmly in the presence of God, a place that leads to true love, true joy, true peace. Abundance is that quality of life that connects us with the divine and helps us see the beauty in our world and in our lives.

This abundance has always been available to us, for abundance of life was God's intention from the beginning. But for whatever reason, we have been unable to see it – unable to grasp it, unable to claim it for ourselves. Sometimes we just need someone to help us find it, to point to it, and remind us what really matters most. That's what our good shepherd does.

After declaring himself to be the good shepherd, Jesus then contrasts the good shepherd with a hired hand. (And he's really talking about the religious leaders here.) The hired hand, he says, does not own the sheep and does not care for them. He's looking after them only because of the money.

While the sheep are everything to the good shepherd and the reason for everything he does, the hired hand just shows up, punches the clock, waits for his shift to be over, and is quickly gone. And if things get too difficult or too risky, the hired hand takes off and runs away. He doesn't love the sheep; probably doesn't even like them. And he cares for them only as long as it isn't a problem for him.

But the good shepherd is not the hired hand. The sheep belong to him. *I know my own and my own know me.* Shepherding is not about the money for him. It's not just a business arrangement. It's very personal. If anything happens to his sheep, he suffers. Just as he delights in their joy, he suffers in their suffering. He wants the best for them and will do whatever it takes to offer them protection, guidance and nurture.

The good shepherd loves his sheep. And it's because of his love for the sheep that he is willing to lay down his life. And that's what our good shepherd did. Four times in this short passage, Jesus speaks of this. In verse 17, he says, *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.*

Jesus lived his life in obedience to God. God had given him a task to do – to care for the sheep - and he was prepared to carry it out to the end, even if it meant death. Truth is, Jesus never doubted that he must die. Nor did he doubt that he would rise again. His confidence was in God and he was sure that God would never abandon him. Therefore, Jesus' death was entirely voluntary. He was not a victim of circumstance. His life would not be taken from him. He would lay down his life because he chose to do so.

It is told that in the First World War there was a young French soldier who was seriously wounded. His arm was so badly smashed that it had to be amputated. Because he was such a young man, the surgeon grieved that he must go through life maimed. So he waited at the soldier's bedside to tell him the bad news when he regained consciousness. When the man's eyes opened, the surgeon said to him, *I'm sorry to tell you that you have lost your arm.* The young man quickly responded, *Sir, I did not lose it; I gave it – for France.* That's what the good shepherd tells us. He did not lose his life; he gave it. The cross was not thrust upon him; he willingly accepted it – for us, his sheep.

Then in verse 18, he says, *and I have power to take it up again.* This is the good news of Easter. The fact that he laid down his life is one thing. But if it ended there, where would we be? If a shepherd loses his life defending the sheep from a predator or would-be thief, the sheep might be

spared in that moment, but what happens to them the next time they are in danger? Those vulnerable sheep would have to defend themselves. That would mean an end for them.

Our good shepherd laid down his life for us. In a crucifixion that was filled with pain and suffering, spit and sweat, torn flesh and blood. He offered his own life so that we might be saved. But he also took it up again. Through his glorious resurrection he has defeated the devil and all the would-be predators that would snatch us away from him, allowing us to live in safety and security – even in the presence of our enemies; even when walking through the valley of the shadow of death

Just as death was not the end for our shepherd, death will not be the end for his sheep. He now lives throughout all eternity, and has prepared a place for us, that we might have abundant life and live in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.