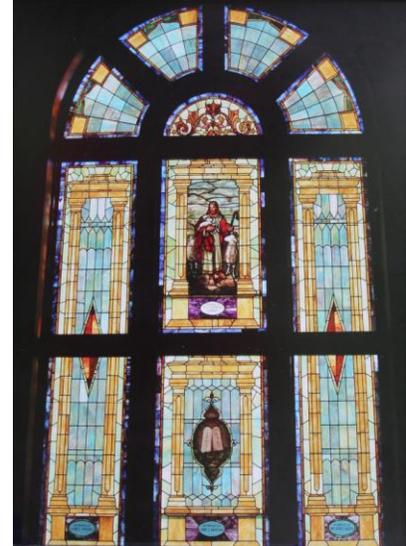


THE GOOD SHEPHERD

JOHN 10:1-15

Rev. Dr. Philip Parker

For many years I served as the pastor of a wonderful church in Portsmouth, Virginia. It was a downtown congregation with a sanctuary that was built in 1915. In that sanctuary there were a number of beautiful stained glass windows, and one of them portrayed Jesus as “the Good Shepherd.” I don’t know who designed that window, but I can’t help but believe that it was inspired by the passage of Scripture that is found in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John. For on two different places within the first 15 verses of that chapter, Jesus says that he is the good shepherd. What did he mean when he made that claim regarding his life and ministry?



Now let’s be honest, most of us don’t know a great deal about sheep and shepherds. Few if any of us have ever raised them, and to be perfectly honest we don’t even see them very often in this part of Virginia. The same was true when I was the pastor of a little country church in the foothills of North Carolina. We wanted to have an outdoor Christmas pageant, and we needed some sheep for the shepherds who would be visited by angels announcing the birth of Christ. We looked all over the county, but

could not find even one sheep for the Christmas pageant. Finally we had to settle for some cardboard cutouts of sheep and two old goats that we were able to borrow. At least the goats bleated like sheep, and to be perfectly honest I'm still not sure if anybody noticed the difference.

Of course, in the days of Jesus there were a lot of sheep, and people were well aware of what was required to take care of them. A common scene played out just about every day was a shepherd leading his flock to and from the fields surrounding the towns and villages of Judea and Galilee. They were also aware of what God had said over and over again about his relationship with them. He was their shepherd and they were his sheep. Was it not David himself who had said, "The Lord is my shepherd?" Had they not on many occasions repeated that portion of Psalm 100 which declares, "Know that the Lord, he is God. It is he who has made us and not we ourselves; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture?" And were they not looking for the fulfillment of what the prophet Isaiah had uttered when he declared, "All we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all?" Well, evidently not, for when Jesus started talking about sheep and shepherds in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, they didn't understand what he was talking about. They didn't seem to realize that he was talking about them and his relationship with them.

And perhaps the same is true for us today? We've heard the words, perhaps many times over that Jesus is the good shepherd, but we're not so sure as to what that actually means. So let's dig into these verses of Scripture and see what Jesus was saying about himself and what he might also be saying about you and me, when he declares, "I am the good shepherd."

First of all, he is saying that like any good shepherd, he knows his sheep. In the Middle East of Jesus' day, many flocks of sheep were herded together into a single enclosure at night. The next morning the shepherd would arrive and call out his sheep. He might even call them out by their names. They would hear his voice and because they knew his voice, they would be willing to follow him. If a stranger showed up and called them out, even if he knew their names, they would back away and refuse to have anything to do with him. That's what Jesus is saying in verses 3 and 4. "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all of his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."

Over the years, I've learned something about animals. They really do get to know our voices. Occasionally my daughter asks me to feed her horses. At first, they weren't too sure who I was and why I was calling them. But I got to know them and they got to know me and the sound of my voice. One evening when I arrived to feed the horses, I noticed that they were grazing a long ways off in the pasture. Instead of walking out into the field, I just raised my voice and called out "Hey, diddle, diddle." They raised their heads and looked in my direction. So I called out again, "Hey, diddle, diddle." And that did it. They came thundering across the pasture because they knew who was calling them, and they had a pretty good idea as to why I was calling them. It was dinner time.

Which brings me to this question? Do you know the voice of the one who has called you and who knows you by name? Well you might answer, “I don’t know what his voice sounds like. Jesus lived a long time ago. How could I possibly know when he is calling me?” The answer is quite simple. Although you may never hear him with your ears, you can hear him with your heart. And the best way to do that is to spend some time with him in his Word. When was the last time that you sat down and really read even a portion of one of the Gospels? Just about everybody has a Bible, but unfortunately we don’t spend much time reading it. Now there are many ways in which Jesus can speak to us. In countries that are closed to the Gospel, where Bibles are not even available, Jesus has appeared to people in visions and dreams. And sometimes we can also see him and hear his voice in the lives of his people. But for most of us the best way and the easiest way to hear his voice is to simply read his Word, especially the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

As we get to know him by reading his Word, then something else will begin to happen. In a way that defies description, we will begin to hear his voice more clearly in our day to day lives. By the power of his Spirit at work in our lives, he will enable us to hear his voice and to follow his leadership as surely as a shepherd leading his sheep. I remember one particular occasion when our family was facing a difficult challenge. Turning to God’s Word I was reassured of his presence and guidance because Jesus is the good shepherd and he knows us by name.

Secondly, Jesus feeds his sheep. In verses 8-10 Jesus declares that he is the gate and that those who come in and out through him will find pasture. In fact, they will experience an abundance of life. Most of us have heard these words, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” They are a part of verse 10, and to be perfectly honest they seem to hold the promise of an abundance of things, in other words the good life free from any want or need. And indeed, for many of us that is true. But their true significance lies even deeper. For you see, the needs of sheep are rather basic. Speaking of the Lord’s provision, David says in Psalm 23, “He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.” That’s all that sheep really need in order to live an abundant life, a quiet brook from which to drink and good pasture from which to graze. It’s the day by day care of the shepherd that really makes the difference. It’s not the heaping up of stuff that determines whether or not life is truly abundant.

Years ago I discovered that truth in an elderly member of our church. She lived on a ramshackle street in a rundown part of the city. Her home was a rather small place which needed constant repair. The kitchen on the back of the house was infested with termites. She lived on her deceased husband’s modest pension. Her home was heated by a room furnace and when it stopped working she didn’t know where to turn. She was absolutely delighted with several members of the church purchased a new one for her and had it installed. In terms of the things of this world, she really didn’t possess all that much. Nevertheless, she lived an abundant life filled with the peace, the joy, and the assurance of God’s love and care. She was an inspiration to all of us in the church because she knew that the Lord was her good shepherd and that he would

supply her “daily bread.” I still possess one of her dinner plates that she gave to me just before she moved to live near her son in Florida. Occasionally she would invite me and other members of our church to come and have dinner with her. With great delight she would serve a simple meal on worn and chipped blue and white china, large three petitioned dinner plates that had been discarded by the Norfolk and Western Railroad where her husband had been employed. Truly she knew how to live the abundant life.

There is, of course, one further way in which Jesus cares for his sheep. He protects them. In verse eleven he says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Unlike the hireling who might run away in the face of danger, Jesus was not going to abandon the flock even at the cost of his own life. They were his sheep and he would protect them, just as David watched over and protected his father’s sheep from wild animals and thieves centuries before. That, indeed, is the message of the cross and the fulfillment of Isaiah 53:6. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Or as Paul states in Romans 5:18, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

In other words, Jesus is responsible for the care of his people in the here and now as well as in the hereafter. Through his death, burial, and resurrection, he opened the gate to heaven so that we might enter in at the end of our lives here on earth. He can also step into our lives to protect us from harm during our earthly existence. For example, in Billy Graham’s book, *Angels*, he tells the story of a missionary family that was targeted for destruction. Their home was surrounded by hostile villagers intent on burning it down and killing them. All that night they prayed. Nothing happened and later the chief of that village became a Christian. When asked as to whether he and his men had planned to kill the family, he stated that that was indeed their plan, but that when they arrived the home was surrounded by many men, big men in shining garments with drawn swords. They had decided not to challenge such fierce adversaries.

But the good shepherd’s protection goes far beyond physical protection. It also embraces the spiritual, even when we are facing death itself. This is what one woman discovered as she received the unwelcome news of fast approaching death as the result of an untreatable cancer. She was beside herself with fear and anxiety. Contacted by her family and urged to come and do something to calm their mother, I went to the hospital. I listened as she poured out her heart, expressing all of her fears, and then I did my best to reassure her that Jesus loved her and that he was going to take care of her and watch over her, even as she faced death itself. Then we prayed together. Several days later I returned for a second visit and found an entirely different person greeting me as I entered the room. Gone were the tears and the distress. Sitting up in bed she said, “I’m ready to face the end of my life. Jesus is here with me and he has promised to take care of me.” She had discovered what Paul said to God’s people in Philippians 4:6 and 7, “Don’t be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ

Jesus.” She now knew that Jesus was her good shepherd, and he was not about to abandon her, even as she faced the end of her life here on earth.

So there you have it. Jesus is our good shepherd. He knows us, he has promised to take care of us and meet our needs, and he is willing and able to protect us; and indeed did so for all eternity when he died for our sins on the cross. But there is one more thing that I need to share with you. Please note that Jesus did not say, “I am a good shepherd.” He said, “I am the good shepherd.” Did you notice that he uses the word “the,” not the letter “a?” In other words, he was not saying that he was one among many shepherds who could take care of God’s sheep, God’s people. He was saying that he was the only one who could fulfill that purpose. In those days shepherds would frequently gather their sheep into a corral or enclosure surrounded by a stone wall at night. There would be one opening or gate, and the shepherd would guard this opening by literally sleeping across it. No one could gain entrance without the shepherd’s permission unless he tried to sneak in over the wall. That’s why Jesus said he was the gate in verse 9. He and he alone was responsible for taking care of the sheep. All others were thieves and robbers who sought to rob, kill, and destroy the flock of God.

Jesus was well aware of the fact that there would be a lot of false shepherds, people who pretended to care for his people, but who in actuality would do everything within their power to destroy them. Near the end of his earthly ministry he warned his disciples that in the last days many false messiahs would arise—Matthew, chapter 24; Mark, chapter 13; and Luke chapter 21. The leaders of the early church also sounded the alarm, and today anyone who takes a serious look at what is taking place religiously at home and abroad knows this to be true. On the one hand some people are saying that there are many paths to God. It’s only a matter of choosing which one you like and doing your best to obey its teachings. Others would say that theirs is the only way, and anyone who disagrees needs to be silenced. But what Jesus said and what the church has affirmed down through the centuries can be summed up in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”

So, in the end it all boils down to this. Is Jesus not only the good shepherd, but is he also your good shepherd? In terms of this life and any life that you might desire to possess in the future, this is a question that each and every one of us must answer.