

“The Good Shepherd”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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First Scripture Lesson: Ezekiel 34:11-16

¹¹For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Second Scripture Lesson: John 10:11-18

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”



Sermon: *“The Good Shepherd”*

Is there a more enduring image of Jesus than that of the good shepherd? Raise your hand if your first bible had a picture of Jesus as a shepherd on the cover, surrounded by sheep. (Mine did). John’s gospel calls Jesus the “Good Shepherd” but the shepherd image features prominently throughout the Bible. Abraham,¹ Jacob,² and Moses³ were, among other things, shepherds. Joseph with his coat of many colors and his brothers were shepherds.⁴ So was David⁵ and the prophet Amos.⁶ And according to Luke’s gospel, angels appeared and shared the good news of Jesus birth first with a group of shepherds.⁷

One of the first bible verses we learn as children and one of the most common verses I am asked to read at funerals, is the 23rd Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . “. Several Old Testament books refer to Israel as a flock without a shepherd⁸ or to the King of Israel as a Shepherd leading his flock.⁹ The prophets Jeremiah,¹⁰ Isaiah,¹¹ Zechariah,¹² Micah,¹³ and Ezekiel¹⁴ all use shepherd imagery to talk about the rulers of Israel and of God’s care and provision for the people.

In the New Testament, Matthew and Mark’s gospels continue that imagery describing the people as being “like sheep without a shepherd.”¹⁵ It is Matthew who also remembers Jesus telling the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep behind to go in search of the one lost sheep.¹⁶ And Matthew and Mark both remember on the night of his arrest, Jesus predicting the disciples’ abandoning him by saying “I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.”¹⁷

It's not difficult to understand why the image of the shepherd holds such power in the bible. Sheep herding was a common vocation and the shepherd was well known for dedication and loyalty while watching over their flocks.

The kind-hearted Jesus, caring for us - the flock; providing our needs, protecting us from the hazards and predators of the open pasture, this image appeals to us because there is something within us that longs to be taken care of - to be protected. And we live in a world that can be dangerous for sheep without a shepherd. This image of Jesus as our shepherd speaks to us the comforting message of the gospel; the good news that God's love for us is unending. And in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we learn that God is more powerful than the things that cause chaos around us.

And that image is more common today than you may realize. In churches we speak of "Pastors" who provide "pastoral" care. The root of the word pastor is the Latin word "pāstor" which means literally one who tends or feeds sheep.¹⁸

But the image of the shepherd, while common to both the Old Testament and the New, is not as enduring as it once was. We no longer live in an agrarian setting. We no longer keep herds and tend fields. Our lives are more fast-paced, and technology driven. Given that change in our realities, how could we rewrite this biblical imagery for a new age? What would be the good shepherd of our era and our cultural reality?

How about the good police officer who walks the beat, protecting your neighborhood and keeping the peace? Or the good parent who provides you a warm, loving home and good food to eat?

But we can be more creative than that... where does our comfort lie? Who are the ones who offer protection from a dangerous and sometimes chaotic world every day?

How about the good IT Guy who always maintains a fast and secure Wi-Fi connection? (Thy spam filter and thy anti-virus, they comfort me...) Or the good diner waitress who makes sure your eggs are never runny and your coffee cup is always full? The good driver who always takes turns slowly, so you don't get carsick? The good Facebook friend who will always click "like" and who will always defend you from trolls?

Maybe. These images do portray that sense of someone looking out for us. But the image of the Good Shepherd is important to maintain, even though it isn't necessarily an image that is familiar to us anymore, because it says as much about the flock as it does the shepherd.

You see, sheep are vulnerable. They're not very fast and they don't have a lot of natural defenses. And they can be dumb. Sheep can be prone to wandering off and getting into trouble without a shepherd to guide and tend them. Which, as it turns out, was a pretty good analogue for the people of Israel. And it is for us, too.

In John's gospel, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd; an image that is rich and vivid; that calls forth a picture of strength and loyalty and courage. The good shepherd is not just one who tends the sheep, he is one who lives for them; and who may even be called on to die for them.

But this is more than an idealized vision of Christ. It is a call back to ancient Jewish thought about God's relationship with Israel. In the first scripture reading we went back to the book of the prophet Ezekiel. Here, the prophet speaks with the voice of God as a good shepherd who will seek out and find the lost sheep of Israel, then nurture them and provide for them, bringing them back from the places to which they have been scattered and providing for them a home of safety and plenty.

"I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will

be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..."¹⁹

So, when Jesus says "I am" the Good Shepherd, we are meant to remember two things: First, it calls us back to this image of God as the good shepherd and invites us to see Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise. But secondly, when Jesus says "I am," in the Greek he actually says it twice in succession. "I am, I am" which is meant to emphasize those words. And we remember back in the book of Exodus when Moses meets God in the burning bush and asks God "who should I say has sent me? God replies simply "I am who I am."²⁰ When Jesus uses the same words, "I am" we are meant to remember the God of Israel who saved the people from slavery and provided for them a land of promise. When we see Jesus described as the "Good Shepherd," we are reminded that in Christ, God is keeping the promises made to Israel so many years before.

Jesus says three important things about what it means for Him to be the Good Shepherd. First, He draws a distinction between the shepherd and the hired hand. The hired hand is *paid* to work alongside the sheep. He or she may very well be qualified to look after sheep, having been well-schooled in their care and feeding. But the hired hand will see this as a job. Their loyalty is to the paycheck, not to the flock. The hired hand *tends* the sheep. But the Shepherd *owns* them. The shepherd lives and breathes sheep. For the good shepherd, tending sheep is not just a job, it is a vocation, their very identity.

To put it another way, when the wolves show-up, the soundtrack of the hired hand is The Clash's "Should I Stay, or Should I Go?"²¹ But for the shepherd it's Prince's "I Would Die 4 U."²²

Secondly, Jesus says that the Good Shepherd knows the sheep and they know Him. Now this is more than a cursory knowing. This is more than just knowing their names or being able to identify their faces. To know someone, truly know them, is to have an intimate understanding of where they have come from and who they truly are. It is to understand their history, their fears, their deep gladness and their profound sadness.

It is worth pointing out that in the Old Testament, the word "to know" is the same word that is used describe the intimate relationship between a married couple. That's why your King James Bible says that Adam "knew" Eve and she bore him a son. That's not to say that God's knowing us is somehow sexual. It means that when we deeply and intimately connect with another person, that relationship begins to approach the depth of God's love for us.

Third, Jesus says that there are other sheep that do not belong to this fold that will also listen to His voice and follow. The Good Shepherd calls for all of God's children to come and follow Him. It is not an invitation for insiders only. It is a broad and open invitation extended to everyone to come and be a part of the flock. The defining characteristic of the flock will therefore not be heritage or religious affiliation or national origin, but rather those who listen to the voice of Jesus - And who follow.

And this is where the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd really means something to us who are part of His flock. The good shepherd leads his sheep to pastures new where there is ample grass for grazing and safety from predators. If we listen to the voice of Christ, we will be led to the place where we need to be. But the life to which Jesus calls us is one of love and compassion, where we look out for one another and seek to serve God's Kingdom first. Which, in our world of ease and luxury, can look pretty unenticing. There are just so many counter-voices competing for our attention and we can get lost in all the noise.

Two weeks ago, I bought a new phone. For several months now, my old one had been bleeding battery life, often dying around mid-afternoon even though I had started the day with a full charge. Incoming calls were going straight to voice-mail and texts would often send or receive literally days after I had originally sent them. It was time for a new phone.

But as I stood in the Verizon store, looking over the possible replacements, I became quickly overwhelmed by all the possibilities. Different sizes and speeds and screen resolutions. Phones that don't need to be plugged in to recharge. Phones that will answer your spoken questions. Phones with multiple cameras and funny filters to make the pictures more interesting because a camera that will take pictures isn't interesting enough. Phones with enough memory to hold hours of movies and cat videos.

Now bear in mind that I grew up in a world without cell phones, as did most of you. I can remember driving home from a friend's house, running late as was often the case, and wishing I had some kind of radio or walkie-talkie so I could call home and tell my parents I was running late. But in order to call them, I would have to find a pay-phone and hope I had a dime in my ash tray. But while searching for a pay phone, I would only make myself *later*. Today I can just pull my cell phone out of my pocket. The mere existence of a communication device that is not tethered to my house or a booth by wires and can literally call anywhere in the world is a miracle of technology.

And yet, while I know I only need a communication device, the voices telling me I need so much more; that with the right device I can be more productive and powerful and entertained! Do I need all those features? Who cares? They sure are cool. The temptation to listen to those voices can be overwhelming.

I decided I didn't need the newest thing and bought last year's model which is still literally thousands of times more powerful than the computers that sent Apollo 11 to the moon.²³ But I became aware of just how enticing those voices are; to have more and be more. We are hungry for something and so we seem to think that more bells and whistles will feed that hunger and soothe that ache.

And that is why the shepherd imagery is so important for us. Because we are easily distracted and can easily wander off and get into trouble. We need to be led; to be guided on the right path. Our journeys can be perilous. There are countless voices calling to us, competing to be heard over the voice of our shepherd.

The voice of the Shepherd says that who you are is enough. That you are beautiful enough and talented enough and smart enough. But the wolves around us shout out that we are not.

The voice of the Shepherd tells us that we are loved, regardless. But the wolves around us continue to tell us that we have to work harder and earn more and accomplish more in order to be worthy of love.

The voice of the Shepherd tells us that all we need is to love and care for one another, and yet the wolves around us cry out that we are in danger from the foreigner and the stranger; that the highest good is to be safe from one another.

The Shepherd tells us to be selfless. The wolves tell us to be selfish.

The Shepherd calls us, leading us forward, showing us the way to God. But the wolves around us offer differing paths, inviting us to worship other gods; to make other things most important in our lives.

The Shepherd calls us to find peace and fulfillment in the Kingdom of God if we will only follow. But the wolves ... the wolves are loud and distracting and they offer false comfort and empty promises.

So how can we turn down the volume on the cacophony of voices that so often distract us from the call of the Shepherd? Well, for starters, by literally turning down the volume on the world around us. By turning off the TV and the internet. By getting off Twitter and Facebook and Instagram for a while and by spending some quiet time in prayer every day; talking to God and listening for God's voice.

We fill so much of our lives with clutter and not all of it is uplifting or worth hearing. According to author John Lawton "*The irony of the Information Age is that it has given new respectability to uninformed opinion.*"²⁴ By turning down the volume on that aural clutter, we can allow ourselves more and better opportunities to listen for where the voice of God is leading us.

The world is filled with distractions and voices encouraging us to consume more and to provide for our own welfare to the detriment of others; to seek safety and meaning in things and wealth and power. But it is when those voices are at their loudest, that we must listen most intently for the voice of the Shepherd, calling us, leading us on to the place where we should be.

When I was a small child, there was a small piece of red construction paper taped-up on the wall of my bedroom. On it was written in the neat hand of one of my Sunday School teachers, a single sentence. I know not who said it originally or from whence it comes. But the words still speak to me all these years later: *“The sheep in the shepherd’s arms, looks only into the eyes of the shepherd, and not to wolves around it seeking to do it harm.”*

Jesus’ invitation to each one of us is just that simple, and it’s just that hard.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Genesis 12:16, NRSV

² Genesis 30:31-32, NRSV

³ Exodus 3:1, NRSV

⁴ Genesis 37:2, NRSV

⁵ 1st Samuel 17:34, NRSV

⁶ Amos 7:14-15, NRSV

⁷ Luke 2:8-20, NRSV

⁸ Numbers 27:17, 1st Kings 22:17, 2nd Chronicles 18:16, NRSV

⁹ 2nd Samuel 5:2, & 7:7, NRSV

¹⁰ Jeremiah 3:15, 23:2, & 31:10, NRSV

¹¹ Isaiah 40:11, NRSV

¹² Zechariah 10:2, NRSV

¹³ Micah 7:14, NRSV

¹⁴ Ezekiel 34, NRSV

¹⁵ Matthew 9:36 & Mark

¹⁶ Matthew 18:12, NRSV

¹⁷ Matthew 26:31 & Mark 14:27, NRSV

¹⁸ “Pastor.” *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, www.dictionary.com/browse/pastor.

¹⁹ Ezekiel 34:13-16, NRSV

²⁰ Exodus 3:13-14, NRSV

²¹ The Clash. “Should I Stay or Should I Go.” *Combat Rock*, 1982.

²² Prince. “I Would Die 4 U.” *Purple Rain*, 1984.

²³ <https://www.zmescience.com/research/technology/smartphone-power-compared-to-apollo-432/>

²⁴ “Ending Denial: Understanding Aboriginal Issues.” *Ending Denial: Understanding Aboriginal Issues*, by Wayne Warry, Broadview Press, 2009, p. 23.