

The Good Shepherd
John 10:1-18

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A pastor was taking a group of parishioners on a tour of the Holy Land. She had just read them the passage from John's gospel about the good shepherd, and she was explaining to them that, as they continued their tour, they would see shepherds on the hillsides just as in Jesus' day.

She wanted to impress the group, so she went into great detail in telling the people about the work of shepherds. She described how, in the Holy Land, shepherds always lead their sheep, always walking in front to face dangers, always protecting the sheep by going ahead of them. She barely got the last word out when, sure enough, they rounded a corner and saw a man and his sheep on the hillside. There was only one problem: the man wasn't leading the sheep as the pastor had said. Instead, he was behind the sheep and seemed to be chasing them. The pastor turned red with embarrassment; she ran over to the fence and said, "I thought shepherds in this region always lead their sheep—out in front. And I told my people that a good shepherd never chases his sheep."

The man replied, "You're right, that's absolutely true... But I'm not the shepherd. I'm the butcher."

It is an image to which virtually everyone in Jesus' time could relate but one that, with the exception of a few places in the world, most people today rarely encounter: the image of the shepherd. We have moved away from the largely nomadic, agrarian society that would fit the vocation of shepherd so well. But even though the shepherd's work is something that most of us will not witness or experience firsthand, still, the image of the shepherd has somehow made its way into our hearts as something comforting and reassuring. It has made its way into our vocabulary of faith, and even though the vocation of shepherding is mostly lost in contemporary society, still the image somehow helps us understand how our Lord relates to us in ways that other images fail to capture.

In John's gospel, Jesus makes declarations about himself that help to clarify who he is, statements that help define what it means when we say that he is our Savior. Jesus introduces each of these declarations with the words, "I am:" I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; next Sunday we will hear Jesus say, "I am the vine, and you are the branches..."; later in the gospel Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life..." Each time Jesus uses the words, "I Am," he is conveying to us something of his character as our Lord and Savior. The words "I am" also comprise the name by which God revealed himself to Moses when Moses asked for God's name: "I am who I am. Tell [the Israelites] that my name is I Am." And so when Jesus uses the words, "I Am" to reveal himself to us, he is helping us to understand who he is as God Incarnate.

In this morning's text from the tenth chapter of John, Jesus gives us two more such statements: "I am the gate for the sheep," and "I am the Good Shepherd." And while it seems like there are two different revelations being given, the truth is the two statements are really part and parcel of the same reality. Jesus is telling us what it means that he is the One to whom we refer when we say, "The Lord is my shepherd." There is much more to what it means that Jesus is our shepherd than we can possibly address in one morning. And so today I want to lift up for our consideration the care with which our Shepherd watches over us, the protection that he provides for us, and the sacrificial love by which he ensures that we may have life, and have it abundantly.

We would be hard-pressed to find anywhere else in all of scripture an image of care that is more total, more all-encompassing than the image of the shepherd. The shepherd's task was round-the-clock care for the flock. His job of leading the sheep to green pastures and still waters was never done. There was not a detail in the life of even one of his sheep with which the shepherd was not intimately involved. In all of scripture, there is no one whose role requires them to care more for those entrusted to them than the shepherd.

The care by which the shepherd keeps the flock is evident in both of Jesus' self-revelations from this morning's text. The first declaration, "I am the gate of the sheep," is somewhat enigmatic for the modern-day reader, but in truth it is an image that conveys the great care and concern the shepherd has for the flock. In the Middle East, flocks are kept at night in small rock-hewn enclosures. There are four walls, with one opening in one of the walls for the sheep to enter and exit the enclosure. At the end of the day, the shepherd leads the sheep to the sheepfold. The shepherd then straddles the wall over the entrance and calls the sheep to enter. As they do, one by one, the shepherd removes the cockleburrs from their wool and he gently rubs salve into their wounds and sores.¹ The shepherd talks to the sheep as they come into the enclosure, so they are comforted as they hear the voice they recognize as that of their provider and protector.

And the good shepherd knows his own sheep. He knows them by name. They know him, because they recognize his voice. The only way the sheep and the shepherd can know each other in that way is because the shepherd never leaves his sheep. The shepherd is always with his sheep. Being a shepherd is not a nine-to-five job; it is a 24/7 occupation. Being a shepherd is not a matter of showing up to an office, making phone calls, or getting on "Facebook" or "Twitter" to communicate with various people; it is about walking alongside those who are in the care of the shepherd, it is about being with those for whom the shepherd is called to care and provide.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He is the one who walks alongside you and me, calling our name. Never is there a moment when he is not at our side, never is there a time when he is not watching over us. He knows us, and he loves us just the same. Jesus is the one who watches over our coming in and our going out, applying his healing balm to our wounds, removing from us those thorns that prick our flesh. Jesus, our Shepherd, cares. He cares for you, and he cares for me; and he cares for those other sheep that you and I don't even know.

1 Lee G. Pattison, "The Good Shepherd, John 10:11-18", [Lectioary Homiletics](http://www.goodpreacher.com) website, www.goodpreacher.com

Jesus is the one who cares, more than anyone else can ever care. And Jesus is also the one who protects his sheep. At night when the sheep are in the sheepfold, the shepherd is the one who lies down in the doorway and sleeps there.² Nothing will come into the enclosure because the shepherd is blocking the doorway; no sheep will leave the enclosure because the shepherd is blocking the doorway. The shepherd puts himself between the sheep and any possible danger that may lurk outside the enclosure.

There is in this passage a contrast made between the true shepherd of the flock, and a mere hireling paid to watch the flock. The hireling will flee at any sign of danger. The hireling is in it for the money, and will not care about the welfare of the sheep. The hireling only wants to be paid for watching the sheep.

But not so the shepherd. The shepherd owns the sheep. The shepherd knows each sheep and calls them by name. The sheep matter to the shepherd, and the shepherd will do whatever it takes to protect the welfare of the sheep.

Jesus is a true shepherd, not a hireling. Jesus does not run away at the sign of danger, but faces evil and danger with us and protects us when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

Philip Keller is a missionary and an author, and he has also lived as a shepherd in various parts of the world. At one point, Keller and his family lived among the Masai of East Africa. The Masai are a shepherding people, and they take great pride in the quality of their livestock. Not long after Keller arrived in East Africa, a young boy about 10 years old was mauled by a lioness while he was tending the family's flock. In an act of self-abandonment and bravery, the boy tackled the lioness after she had tried to attack one of the sheep. The lioness then turned against the boy and nearly killed him.

Keller later asked the boy why he had gone against the lioness. The boy replied that it was because the sheep were his. He was not a hireling; his love and honor and loyalty were at stake.³

And in that story there is an example of what Jesus means when he says that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. You see, Jesus has given his life so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. When Jesus went to the cross, it was not happenstance that put him there, nor was it simply the result of a tragic series of events planned by some evil people. When Jesus went to the cross it was so that we wouldn't have to go. When Jesus went to the cross it was so that he could fight the battle with sin and death, because he is the one who can conquer those powers. When Jesus went to the cross it was because we are his; he is our Shepherd, and he cares for us, and he loves us, and he will do whatever it takes to bring his sheep safely into the fold, even if it means laying down his life for us.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd."

When you say, "The Lord is my shepherd," what kind of shepherd are you thinking of?

2 See footnote 1 above

3 Philip Keller, *The Inspirational Writings*, New York: Inspirational Press, 1993, p. 365. This story was taken from *A Shepherd Looks at the Good Shepherd and His Sheep*, one of the works included in this anthology.