

Jesus the Good Shepherd John 10:9-16, 27-30

Portions adapted from: I Am The Good Shepherd, by Denn Guptill @ SERmonCentral.Com

In this morning's scripture lesson, we hear Jesus say not once but twice, "**I am the Good Shepherd.**" So you may ask, why a Shepherd?

He used this title for Himself probably for a couple of reasons. As you read through the gospels, you learn that Jesus was a genius at taking the everyday and using it to illustrate the eternal. The Kingdom of God is like: a man working in a field, a woman baking bread, a fisherman casting his net into the water.

So perhaps on this day as Jesus and His followers were walking around the Palestinian countryside, they paused to watch a shepherd lead his flock of sheep across the road.

Or maybe this wasn't a spontaneous teaching, but rather a carefully planned and crafted message. We don't think of Jesus' teaching in that light do we? We don't think of Him writing a sermon or preparing His thoughts in advance; we just assume that everything He said was a natural outflow of who He was. I can't speak for other pastors but I spend extensive hours each week studying, writing, molding, and then rehearsing the entire message that you hear on Sunday mornings. Some preachers can stand up and deliver a powerful sermon with just an open Bible in their hands. I am not one of them. Like the sheep we hear about today, without a steady guide out in front of me, I find it too easy to wander away and get lost.

So maybe Jesus had stayed up late the night before wondering how He would convey these specific thoughts to those who followed Him and decided on the analogy of a shepherd and sheep. Since, 2000 years ago in Israel everyone knew how sheep acted and what the tasks of a shepherd were. So perhaps, we also ought to know that when the Bible uses sheep as an analogy for God's people, isn't always a compliment. And while shepherding was considered among the lowest class jobs in society – like being a garbage collector, King David himself began as a shepherd, so when he wanted to describe God's care for our lives, he wrote "**The Lord is my shepherd.**'

But what does this mean to us today? Sheep and shepherds are not a common sight along our roads. When we see sheep, there are usually less than a dozen spread out peacefully grazing in a green fenced in pasture and there isn't a shepherd anywhere in sight. Very few, if any of us have even met a real shepherd. So now, Jesus describing Himself as a "the good shepherd" perhaps conveys as much meaning to us as describing the work of a snow plough operator to a Filipino.

But we need to understand what being a "good shepherd" means because it is one of only two analogies which Jesus, having used to describe Himself, then expects us to imitate. A few weeks back, we heard Jesus describe Himself as "*the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life*"

(John 8:12). Perhaps, at that time you recalled Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount: "*You are the light of the world — like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden — let your light shine before others.*" (Matthew 5:14-15). But nowhere do you see Jesus commanding those who would follow Him to be a vine, or a gate, or bread, or the Way.

Now, when Jesus says, "*I am the good Shepherd*," we might remember that in His last conversation with Peter, not once but three times, urged Peter to *feed my sheep*" (John 21:15-17). This shepherd idea must have resonated with His disciples because we see it appearing again in several of their letters. Passing through Ephesus on his way to Rome, addressing the church leaders with what he thought might be his farewell remarks, Paul urged, "*Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that He obtained with the blood of His own Son..*" (Acts 20:28)

This is also a theme Paul would also return to in his letters from prison, writing, *The gifts [Jesus] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some **pastors** and teachers* (Ephesians 4:11) The Greek word, translated here as "**pastor**," literally means "**shepherd**." So it should not surprise you to learn that our modern word "pastor" comes from a Latin verb meaning, "**to lead to pasture, set to grazing, cause to eat**". So I take very seriously that the characteristics which Jesus applied to himself as the "Good Shepherd," should also apply to those with whom He entrusts His flock today.

What then are the characteristics of a good shepherd? I suspect that when Jesus said "*I am the Good Shepherd*," many of those hearing Him would have immediately thought of David's 23rd Psalm and about how God, the Shepherd, was described there.

So this morning, using the 23rd Psalm as our guide, let's look at **three major tasks** of what a good shepherd is supposed to do: **lead, protect, and discipline**.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters.

First, we need to forget this modern image of sheep peacefully grazing in green, fenced in fields. I don't even think that the flocks free ranging in our American west, match up to the hardships involved with shepherding in the Middle East where good pasture was a rare find.

A Shepherd was first expected to **lead** the sheep to food. In the arid Palestinian countryside good grazing is always a moving target. If sheep are allowed to graze too long at one spot they will destroy what little grass is growing there, thus the shepherd must constantly be moving the sheep from area to area so they can get enough to eat without overgrazing, thus rendering that area barren thereafter.

If you grew up watching westerns you are probably familiar with the term “Cattle drive;” you can picture in your minds the whooping cowboys riding behind and beside the herd driving their cattle from point “A” to point “B.” But here it says the shepherd **leads** the sheep.

From what I have read, sheep aren’t the brightest of animals but they do trust their shepherd. In today’s text Jesus tells us that the sheep recognize the shepherd’s voice and come to him

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. (10:3-4)

The sheep know the shepherd’s voice because they hear it all the time, they understand that if they follow that voice then good things will happen, they will be led to food and water.

In our daily life as Christ followers we are supposed to follow Christ. That should be a no-brainer. The Sheep trust that the shepherd is concerned about their well-being and that he will take them to where they can find both food and water. If we follow Christ, His words, His teaching and His example then we will be provided for spiritually. And like sheep if we are familiar with His voice we will find it easier to follow His voice. That’s why we read the scriptures, to become familiar with Jesus so we will know His voice.

Jesus then continued on saying “[sheep] will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” So if you are familiar with the voice of Jesus when you hear something that just doesn’t jive with His voice, you know better than to follow, even if that voice comes from a pulpit; like sheep, you should also run from that stranger.

It’s when we decide that as sheep, we know better than the shepherd and we go our own way that we get into trouble. At different times in the gospels, Jesus talks about sheep that get lost. Those are sheep who came to the conclusion that they knew more than the shepherd and decided instead to go their own way. The scriptures warn, *There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death.* (Proverbs 14:12)

As your pastor, as Jesus’ under-shepherd, my responsibility is to lead you where God would have you to go, to direct you to where you can be fed spiritually.

The 23rd psalm continues, *even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.* **The Shepherd leads, but he also protects the Sheep**

How many of you remember the old Looney Tunes cartoons? One of my favorite cartoons pitted **Ralph the wolf against Sam the sheep dog**. Remember, that they

would clock into work together each morning, "Morning Ralph, morning Sam, then spend the day doing what they do best. The wolf trying his hardest to steal a sheep and the sheepdog preventing him from stealing said sheep (the wolf always lost). At the end of the day they would again clock out together, the wolf worse for the wear, and then probably head down to the pub for a brew (but being a kid's show, we never got to see that part).

Palestinian sheep weren't raised in fenced in farms, All their life they roamed the open hills where wild animals also roamed. Often times while the sheep were looking for something to eat, predators in the same area were also looking for something to eat. And, while sheep had a number of natural enemies they had no natural defenses. They couldn't run that fast. They are herbivores so their teeth really aren't designed to bite in defense (*although most pastors have discovered that sheep can bite*). Sheep really are helpless. It is up to the shepherd to protect them against all kinds of wild animals.

Remember the story of David, as a young shepherd offering to fight the giant Goliath? King Saul says, "*Don't be ridiculous, you are just a boy,*" but David counters with these words:

Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. (1 Samuel 17:34-35)

If we follow Jesus' voice He not only leads us, He also protects us. Time and time again in the New Testament false teachers are portrayed as wolves that want to prey on God's sheep. Part of my responsibility as your pastor, your shepherd, is to protect you from those false teachings; to counter them and point people in the right direction. And remember the best way to recognize what is false teaching is to be immersed in the truth yourself.

As a bank manager, my father took courses on how to spot counterfeit money. In some of those courses they never saw a single counterfeit bill. Instead they would spend so much time closely observing, carefully handling, real money so that when a counterfeit crossed their hands it would instinctively look and feel wrong. If you have immersed yourself in God's word, then when a wolf tries to slip you something counterfeit, it will instinctively feel wrong; and again the best defense is to run from such.

The third thing a Shepherd does may sound cruel. The rod and staff that "comforted" the sheep did so in three ways, both by **leading and protecting**, but also if needed by **disciplining**.

The **rod**, which we know as a **shepherd's crook**, was a long pole with a big hook on the end, primarily used to snag a sheep that needed some close up attention or was beginning to wander. The **staff** was a stout pole, sharpened at one end and used primarily as a weapon against attackers, but it could also give a stubborn sheep a quick whack on the rear to keep them in line.

However, when a particular sheep begins to make a habit of wandering, after a while there are basically three outcomes facing them, the shepherd could let them be eaten by something, the shepherd himself could eat them, or the shepherd could discipline them.

I have read stories purporting to be true, that sometimes a shepherd finds himself with a particular headstrong lamb who also seemed to have natural leadership abilities (apparently with sheep, like people, these two characteristics often go together). If left alone, this individualistic character would lead other sheep away from where they were supposed to be and into danger. So, if the shepherd couldn't stop this behavior he would resort to the drastic measure of intentionally breaking one of the lamb's legs. The shepherd would then set the leg and afterwards carry the lamb as he walked along. That lamb, now completely dependent on the shepherd for his food and water, would get used to staying close to the shepherd, so when the leg finally healed he would no longer be a danger to himself or to the other sheep.

Remember those paintings with Jesus carrying a lamb on His shoulders? This puts their relationship in a different light doesn't it?

Now I have a confession to make. I don't like discipline. Didn't like it as a child, didn't like it as teen, don't like it as an adult; especially when it was administered by those – in my mind – having no right to discipline. But discipline is a necessary part of life and accountability. Without sound discipline administered by our good shepherds, none of us would ever amount to much.

Listen to what the Bible has to say about discipline

My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by Him; for the Lord disciplines those whom He loves and chastises every child whom He accepts. Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ... [Our parents] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but [God] disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share His holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12: 5-7, 10-12)

At some point we have all needed to be disciplined; learning a painful lesson of, "this is right and that is wrong." Be assured, discipline has never been a favorite part of any good pastor's tasks, yet when needed, it has to be done for the sake of both the individual sheep and the entire flock.

Lead, protect, discipline, this is what every good shepherd is expected to do, but bear in mind that there are a couple things that a shepherd can't do.

A Shepherd can't have baby sheep. This might sound silly but often times in the church, if the flock isn't growing, the sheep blame the shepherd. But in reality, the shepherd's task is to provide a safe healthy place for the sheep and in that environment they are supposed to reproduce. Only sheep can make other sheep. Only Christians can help birth other Christians.

Nor can a Shepherd eat for his sheep. I'm sure that you have all heard the old adage "*You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink.*" Well you can lead the sheep to food, but you can't make them eat.

If the sheep are going to grow and stay healthy, then they have to eat, but the shepherd can't force them to eat. If Christ Followers are going to grow and stay healthy then they must feed themselves on God's word, but the shepherd can't force them to do so. If you aren't personally, regularly feeding on the Word of God through the weekdays and you feel spiritually weak, don't blame the pastor. People sometimes say "*Well I'm just not being spiritually fed on Sunday.*" What would happen if you only ate food once a week, on Sunday? You'd starve to death.

Here's a rather earthy illustration of what a pastor is actually doing with the Sunday sermon. Above the Arctic Circle, the Eskimo's primary diet is whale blubber, which is way too hard and chewy for a baby to eat. So momma Eskimo takes a bite of whale blubber and having thoroughly chewed it into a soft gooey mass, she then spits it into the hungry mouth of her baby. If you are not also personally feeding on God's word, that's all you get with the Sunday sermon: lovingly, carefully prepared baby food. So when I hear someone say, they are just not being fed by the Sunday sermon, my prayer is, "*Lord teach them to eat.*"

Let me close with the words of Peter, remember this is the Peter that Jesus commanded to feed His sheep.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. ... For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:10,25)

May God always give us good shepherds to **lead** us to green pastures beside still waters, to **protect** us through the valleys of the shadow of death, and as needed to **discipline** us, so that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Let's pray about this.