

Jesus, The Good Shepherd

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Three services

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At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, the Colonnade of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and send to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." John 10:22-30

How many of you have ever come close to a sheep? What kind of a picture do you have in your mind about sheep? If you have ever been up real close to sheep, you know their fleece isn't "white as snow". It is more grey from all the dirt and burrs. Sheep are often messy, smelly, and not particularly smart. So when Jesus calls us sheep, it is not exactly a compliment!

But Jesus loves us anyway and being called sheep is a good illustration. Sheep are very vulnerable and quite dependent on the care of the shepherd. I still remember reading a book about them years ago. It said that if a sheep gets separated from the flock, it is in danger. First of all, there are predators out there that like to kill sheep. Sheep are weak and don't put up much of a fight. Secondly, they can get themselves in a lot of trouble very easily. If a sheep gets rolled over on its back, it usually cannot right itself again. If someone does not come along to help it, it can die in that position.

Straying from the flock or getting lost are not the only dangers facing sheep. At the very beginning of chapter 10, our Lord talks about danger inside the sheep pen. Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep." Then Jesus goes on to explain further when he says, "I am the gate for the sheep...I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture."

In Jesus' day, sheep and shepherds were common figures, because it was an agricultural society. Moses and David were well known as shepherds. Language referring to sheep and shepherds is often found in the Old Testament. Furthermore, God sees himself as the Great Shepherd. Ezekiel 34 tells us, "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and bring them into their own land. I will feed them with good pasture...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God." The record shows that God has done this throughout history.

Now God the Father is the Great Shepherd, but he has set in place shepherds under him through whom he seeks to work and care for his people. We see one good example of that in Ezekiel 34:23 where he says, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd."

God has, down through history, set up and used other "under" shepherds to look out for, care for, and feed his people. Among those sent was another Great Shepherd, a descendant of David. But this Great Shepherd had a special mission. He came, not just to care for and feed his people, but that his people might have eternal life and never perish. Thus we have these precious words from Jesus in John 10:27 this morning: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

This shepherd was different than all other shepherds. Normal shepherds had to face predators such as lions and bears and wolves, But their goal was to fight them off, not to actually lay down their life. Actually the shepherd losing his life would have been a disaster for his sheep. But in John 10:11, Jesus says he is the good shepherd who has come to lay down his life for the sheep. He died and rose again to unite us with God, and to also unite us with each other. He clearly says that he has other sheep also that are not of that particular sheep pen. He is talking about non-Jewish believers. We are included in that. He says he must bring them also so that there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Again, some knowledge of the habits of a shepherd and his sheep help us here. During the day the sheep would usually be grazing in the fields. At night the shepherd would guide them into a sheep pen. This was a court surrounded by walls but open to the sky and with only one entrance. The walls kept the sheep from wandering and protected them from wild animals. Apparently, there were often large folds where several flocks were kept, and at the gate there was a watchman who was in charge. He would recognize the shepherd and let him bring his flock in.

Note how personal this was. It goes beyond being a mere illustration. God himself was called "The Shepherd of Israel" in several places in the Old Testament. Sheep recognize the voice of their own shepherd and respond only to him. A shepherd does not call sheep randomly but only those who belong to him. The shepherd led his sheep. He did not drive them. They followed him because they knew his voice.

Which brings us to a question. Do you know this shepherd? Are you following him? Are you navigating this world guided by your own ideas or philosophy or have you come to know the one who created us and came to earth, taking on human flesh. Are you looking forward to meeting this Jesus and seeing what God has planned for our future? If you have to admit you don't know this Jesus, see one of the pastors, or someone else who you consider to be a strong Christian, and ask how your relationship with God can be improved. True life is connected to God and involves a relationship with him.

Jesus gives comfort, peace, and good news to those who know him and are following him. He cares for us. He knows each of us by name. He is "the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) for everyone that trusts in him. He brings us comfort with his words in John 10:29, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."

The Apostle Paul reinforces this with his words from Romans. He says, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else is all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38)

The summary of the message for this day is truly amazing. The Maker of heaven and earth, the One who created life and even took on flesh to redeem His people, is our Shepherd! Hear his words of comfort given through his prophet Isaiah over 2,000 years ago: "Fear not, for I am with you." Amen.