

*Sermon I Am the Good Shepherd (The Fourth Sunday of Easter) April 22, 2018*

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I 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. For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life in order to take it up again. No 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." John 10:11-18

The imagery of God as a shepherd is prevalent in scripture, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures. In today's gospel lesson Jesus addresses His attackers and critics, who were offended that Jesus did things (like heal people) and said things (like forgiving sins) that only God could do. At the end of this chapter, John 10, the religious community were picking up rocks to stone Jesus for His blasphemy. Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" Earlier when Jesus had healed a blind man He said, "I came into this world... that those who do not may see" and leaders in the religious community challenged Him, saying, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Seven times in the gospels Jesus identified Himself with an "I Am" statement: "I Am the bread of life. I Am the light of the world. I Am the Door. I Am the true vine. I Am the good shepherd. I Am the resurrection and the life. I Am the way and the truth and the life." I want to read to you from Exodus, chapter 3: "Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God. GOD said, "I've taken a good, long look at the affliction of My people in Egypt. I've heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, get them out

of that country and bring them to a good land with wide-open spaces, a land lush with milk and honey... The Israelite cry for help has come to Me, and I've seen for Myself how cruelly they're being treated by the Egyptians. It's time for you to go back: I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt." Moses answered God, "But why me? What makes you think that I could ever go to Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?" "I'll be with you," God said. "And this will be the proof that I Am the one who sent you: When you have brought My people out of Egypt, you will worship God right here at this very mountain." Then Moses said to God, "Suppose I [do] go to the People of Israel and I tell them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you'; and they ask me, 'What is God's name?' What do I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I-AM-WHO-I-AM. Tell the People of Israel, 'I-AM sent me to you.'"

Some bible scholars think that God's self-given name, "I Am" reveals God's presence, as in "I Am with you." It would be, according to prophecy, a name given to Jesus Christ: Emmanuel, which means "God-with-us." Seven times Jesus identifies Himself to the doubting religious community as, "I Am." Throughout the Psalms and the Prophets God is seen and experienced as a shepherd to God's people. For those who were outraged and offended at Jesus' alarming disregard of the Law and His shockingly inclusive welcome for all people, Jesus calling Himself the Good Shepherd was cause for stoning, and if that failed, cause for crucifixion.

This is the fourth Sunday of Easter, this season of doubt and resurrection, of hope and confusion. These were the experiences of the followers of Jesus, people who'd seen Jesus crucified and some of them witnessed the Risen Christ, and all of them wondering what to believe and what now to do. Two thousand years later we still share their feelings

of doubt and resurrection, of hope and confusion, and of wondering what it means to follow Jesus.

Jesus identified Himself (for those who were not convinced by what Jesus did and said that identified Him as God) Jesus said, "I Am the good shepherd." And Jesus explained what it meant: that the good (the model or ideal shepherd is what that word "good" translates to) the good shepherd lays down their life for the sheep; the sheep know the shepherd's voice; and the shepherd and the sheep know and trust each other.

I don't have any experience with sheep, but Jesus' listeners would have. Shepherding would have been an off-putting occupation to the religious community for Jesus to identify with. Shepherds were unclean, highly distrusted, smelly, unwelcome people, outsiders, who wouldn't have been found in the temple or the synagogue or anywhere else in a practicing religious community. So Jesus started out teaching those who were distrustful and suspicious of Him by saying, "I Am the good shepherd." Certainly He had everyone's attention, and probably some revulsion that this itinerate Rabbi identified Himself both as God (the highest form of shepherd) and as a shepherder (the lowest form of humanity.) Scripture is full of nuance and Jesus was a wordsmith, and so to take the bible, or to take Jesus' sayings, at face-value is to miss much of what's there.

Throughout scripture people are referred to as sheep, and I've thought it's because sheep are somewhat stupid. What I've learned about them, however is not that they're stupid, but that they have to be led. Cows are driven, or moved, from behind, but sheep need to follow. Sheep are acquainted with their shepherd's voice, and trust it, and follow it. Shepherds, in Jesus' day, would give their life rather than lose a sheep. Tending and leading the flock was the shepherd's livelihood and reputation and losing even one sheep

could destroy both of those. Earlier Jesus had told a parable about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep safe in the pen to go search for the one lost sheep; identifying Himself as the shepherd who searches for the one lost sheep.

My family raised Guide Dogs for the Blind when I was growing up. We had thirteen puppies that we trained and welcomed into our homes for one year at a time, and when they were a year old, they returned to the Guide Dog Center for formal training. I got my own first Guide Dog puppy as a ten-year-old, and it was my job to train her to be part of our family, to acclimate her to my human experiences... walking down the street, and riding the bus, and sitting for an appointment, and most importantly hearing and responding to my voice. I taught Julie to sit and stay and fetch and heel and to live in my world, and to be alert and sensitive to it. And Julie taught me to understand the way a puppy thinks and responds. We became a team, going to 4-H field days and training events and other than school, Julie pretty much went everywhere I did. I can't tell you that a puppy and a sheep are anything alike but that my experience with Guide Dogs tells me that dogs are like sheep, and want to be led, and want to know and trust their trainer's voice. A Guide Dog will eventually lead a sightless person, guiding them to wait at a stoplight, and cross a busy street, and avoid obstacles on the sidewalk. When we were little girls our mother would take us to San Rafael to shop and we'd see Guide Dogs with their blindfolded trainers, learning how to be responsive to and anticipate a vulnerable, sightless person's needs. They could take their place as Guide Dogs because they'd learned as puppies from families like mine, to love and trust and listen to the voice of their trainer.

Jesus was a trainer, who still - if you have eyes to see and ears to hear and an open heart - Jesus still guides His children to love and trust His voice. He said, "I Am the good shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me." When we learn to listen to and trust and obey Jesus' voice, we become His sheep. And He models for us what it is to be a good shepherd, and we become shepherds ourselves, seeking and finding the lost, and bringing them to Jesus.

Jesus said, "I 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." There are two words that describe the church in the developed world, "aging and declining." I know there are mega-churches, but the majority of the people in the western world don't attend church, and don't know our good shepherd. What does it mean that Jesus has other sheep that don't belong to this fold? What does it mean to you and me?

Last week we had Messy Church training here, and we were asked by the facilitator, "Why would you 'do' Messy Church? What's a reason for your church to have a Messy Church?" I said, "We have this beautiful courtyard that families walk through, and we have a community of parents and children on our campus [at the preschool] and we don't know how to reach them. And most of them [not a judgment but a statistic] don't know the love and grace of Jesus."

Jesus said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also." It's not enough that we know God as the one who leads us beside still waters and restores our souls, that we know Jesus as the good shepherd who lays down His life for love of us. There are other sheep who don't know Him, and He has modeled for us what it is to love... sacrificially. Are we willing to move out of the pew and into the courtyard or

the park or wherever there are families and children who need to know that Jesus is the good shepherd? Are we willing to shepherd them as Jesus has taught us? This is burning a fire in my heart, and I pray that it could be a ministry for us here, to pass the torch of faith to other generations.

This is a really dense seven verses from John's gospel, and I can't going to cover it all. I'm grateful for Jeff Deiss' Sunday morning class that reads and reflects on the lectionary. You might continue to spend some time this week reading and reflecting on today's gospel lesson. Jesus said, "I lay down My life in order to take it up again" and this tells us that Jesus knew that in spite of what was waiting for Him in Jerusalem, at Golgatha, on the cross, God would triumph; God would have the last word; Jesus would rise from the dead, and death will no longer be our final destination. Jesus said, "I Am" identifying Himself as God, and then showing us what it is to have a good shepherd, and a Savior, who lays down His life for love of us. Can we do any less for those who don't yet know His voice? As we enter into a time of silent prayer now ~ let's reflect on how Jesus is our good shepherd, and how He's calling us to shepherd others. Amen.