

I Am- The Good Shepherd

John 10:11-18
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First Presbyterian Church
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There once was a sheep farmer whose “neighbor’s dogs were killing his sheep. It got so bad, he had to do something. So he examined his options. First, he could have brought a lawsuit and taken his neighbor to court. Second, he could have built stronger fences so the dogs couldn’t get in. But he had a better idea. He gave some lambs to his neighbor’s children. When these lambs began to multiply and their little flocks began to develop, the neighbor tied up the dogs and his problems were over.”¹

God’s greatest desire for humankind is that we come to realize we’re all like sheep who are loved and cared for by the same shepherd, the Good Shepherd under whose care, our problems are overcome.

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” What more could you ask or need in order to feel well cared for, safe, without a worry in the world. And yet, we do worry, don’t we? The world is dangerous and we don’t always feel safe. The world is competitive and combative, and there are times when feel shoved aside, even slapped in the face. What’s up with that?

If Jesus is there for us as the Good Shepherd, why do we suffer so? Why do we get gripped by fear? What do we have to fear? Well, it’s because ,sheep are vulnerable; we are vulnerable. So we do get gripped by fear. We get lost, or led astray, attacked and torn apart like sheep set upon by a pack of vicious dogs. We all face danger, even viciousness, in this world. And often, there’s nothing we’ve done to deserve it, and nothing we could have done to avoid it. Sudden illness or disease can strike at any moment. People get fired or furloughed without cause. Bills pile up while savings dwindle. Friends become enemies, neighbor turns on neighbor, and whole sectors of society suffer because of the hate and greed in the hearts of others.

Jesus warns us about that. He warns us about the hired hand who doesn’t really care about the sheep, care about you. He warns us about the wolves all around us, those who tear at others so they can have more and more and more. The hired hands Jesus refers to are those who are of the world, those people and systems that have no compassion for someone in a tough spot. And the wolf, the wolf is all the danger that lurks just around the corner for any of us – things that can attack your spiritual, financial, physical and relational wellbeing.

¹ Novelist and playwright Dr. Wallace Hamilton, as cited by Hal Brady, Dallas, Texas, “Making Order out of Chaos,”

Of course, sometimes sheep get led astray rather than outright attacked. We've all been led astray at one time or another, like when you give in to that irresistible craving for something you know is not good for you. Or we just plain lose our way, like sheep wandering away from the flock, heading in the wrong direction. Any and all of this can leave you feeling afraid, hopeless and abandoned. We've all been there. That's just the way of the world, just the way things are outside the safety and provision of Jesus' little flock of sheep.

The sheep referred to in today's Bible lesson are those who claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and who gather in his name to discover and live out that calling. What is it to gather in the name of Jesus Christ, to discover and live out our calling as Christians?

The Book of Acts paints a picture of what that's like. As Peter says in Acts 2:21, "... Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." This means that all it takes to be welcomed into flock of the Good Shepherd is to claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And once you've done that, Acts 3:19 says one must "repent ... and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

Here we see that, entering the sheepfold is one thing, but staying there is quite another. To enjoy the care and protection of the Lord, we have to continually repent from our sinful, misguided ways and turn toward God, receiving the forgiveness of the Lord. And then comes the really hard part – living alongside others in the peace and safety of the sheepfold of Jesus. Acts 2 says that "all the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Studying the word of God, being in fellowship with one another, praying for each other – that's quite a commitment.

And there's more. "All who believed," says Acts, "were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." To be a follower of Jesus is to be together as one, sharing our resources, our struggles and our joys; giving to those in need; worshiping the Lord and praising God; and being an example to others, so that the Lord may enter their hearts and bring them into his fold. "I have other sheep," says Jesus, "... 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."

This is the vision Jesus lays out for those who follow him. It's a vision he calls us to live into, even in the midst of a world that just doesn't see it, a world full of disinterested hired hands and greedy, vicious wolves.

So much of the struggle and danger of this world is created by those who insist on doing things their way, getting what they want- with little or no regard for others, or for the way God envisions

things. And we get caught up in that, too, doubling down on our misguided ways rather than returning to the fold when we wander off things get rough and danger strikes. And yet, that's what we need to do as members of Jesus' flock, as the beloved sheep of his pasture – we need to stay close to Jesus, stay close to and follow the Good Shepherd.

So let us all this week – even today, where you are lost and wandering, right now – think of those places where danger lurks in your life, those rough and barren places that leave you bogged down or going without, those outside forces that tear at you bit by bit.

Think of the struggles you face, amid your strength and turn to Jesus. What would it look like to open yourself up to his protection, his guidance, his provision? What do you need to do to draw nearer to the Good Shepherd to be cared for as one among his flock of the beloved? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and loving Lord, we walk at times through the deepest and darkest valleys of life: sickness, job loss, broken marriages, children who've lost their way, and, yes, even death.

Yet we know these valleys are not the destination, not our destiny. We know the One who has faithfully led his followers through this valley countless times before.

For, you, O Lord, are our Shepherd; we shall not want. You, O Lord, lead us beside the still waters. You lead us in the paths of righteousness. We will fear no evil; we will fear nothing in this valley of darkness, for you, O Lord, are our Shepherd.

We pray your care and comfort, protection and assurance for those facing surgeries, those recovering, and those seeking renewed health and strength, and especially those we lift up in our hearts at this time.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, as he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.