

## Keeping the Flock Safe

John 10:22-30

One of the most popular, most well-loved images of Jesus is of him as our Good Shepherd. It's been that way almost since the very beginning. One of the earliest pieces of Christian art is of a shepherd, painted in the catacombs below Rome, where the earliest Christians buried their dead when things were very dark indeed for Christians. The military power of Rome had turned against Christians. They were killed in persecution, slaughtered in sport.

Somehow, however, as some things in Rome became darker for the Christians, other things became clearer. These early Christians, suffering persecution, began painting figures on the walls of their graves. Clear visions of God's mercy and power. In the darkness of the catacombs, they painted to show the light of salvation. In the tombs, where the early Christians buried their martyrs, who had been killed and cast off by the powers of the world. On the walls of these tombs, the early Christians painted their Savior, confessing the wonderful power of God. A power that saw and claimed the persecuted, the killed, the powerless, and the rejected. One figure, with a lamb across his shoulders, is the great Shepherd of the sheep. This is how the early Roman Christians retold the story of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who had laid down his life for them and defeated death for them. This is how they told of how, despite death and darkness, the Good Shepherd kept them safe, and none of his flock would be snatched out of his hand.

Today's Gospel reading is where that image is made most clear, for Jesus says multiple times throughout John 10, "I am the good shepherd." For his hearers, shepherds were very common place, both in Israel and for the Gentiles. Shepherds wore simple clothes, carried wooden staffs, and looked and smelled like they lived out among their sheep. Those who were in Jerusalem thought about the idyllic life in the country, or remembered that life in the country was not as idyllic as others imagined. For the Jewish hearers of Jesus, though, there was another set of images that this would have brought to mind. The idea of a shepherd was also closely connected to their understanding of God.

This wasn't just because God seemed to use shepherds a lot. Moses saw the burning bush while he was out being a shepherd. The shepherd keeps the flock safe by

defending it from enemies. When David announces he will confront Goliath, King Saul can't believe it. David, though, says that he's defended his flock from wild animals, from lions and bears. He killed those animals, and he says he will kill Goliath just like he killed them. Just as David worked to keep his flock of sheep safe, so God would use David to keep the flock of Israel safe.

God is described as a shepherd, and the kings and priests and prophets are also described as shepherds, caring for the flock of the people of Israel. Yet they often failed in their charge to care for their flock, to keep their flock safe. At best, they allowed the flock to be hurt through neglect. But all too often they would actively hurt those in their charge in attempts to increase their own power and prestige. So the people of Israel would wander away from God, like sheep without a shepherd, going astray and following other voices instead of the voice of the Good Shepherd.

But the same problems kept popping up, and the Pharisees had not learned from those who were charged with keeping the flock safe before them. In John chapter 9, Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth. Because the man was healed on a Sabbath, and because the man said that it was Jesus who had healed him, the Pharisees cast him out of the synagogue, out of a relationship with God. The Pharisees did not care for the flock they were watching, but only cared about themselves and their power and prestige.

Today's Gospel lesson shows Jesus teaching in the temple again. Every year we celebrate this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter as Good Shepherd Sunday, and the Gospel lesson is always from John 10. John tells us it is the Feast of Dedication, which is celebrated today as Hanukkah. It commemorates an event that happened between the Old and New Testaments. The foreign ruler tried to make himself a god, and erected a statue of Zeus and sacrificed pigs in the temple. The Maccabees, a family of priests, revolted and regained independence for Israel, at least until the Romans came. The temple was rededicated, and it's the festival of lights to celebrate the lamps that didn't go out during the revolt. The priests did what they did to keep their flock safe.

Jesus will do more to keep the flock safe than the Maccabees did when they led the revolt, though. He won't just overthrow an egotistical ruler. He will defeat the devil, who thinks he's the ruler of the world. Jesus laid down his life to keep the flock safe.

In the time after Jesus' death and resurrection, as they faced persecution, the early Christians needed to be reminded Jesus sees their suffering and he comes to find them, to bind up their wounds, and gather them together and give them the promise of life everlasting. They needed to be reminded that Jesus would keep them safe, and that nothing, not even death, could snatch them out of his hand. In the catacombs, in the mazes of death, the early Christians confessed Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life. He is the one who has come to save God's people and he calls all people to follow him.

The flock stays together by listening to the shepherd's voice. The more we listen to it, the more we're able to recognize it. The more we listen to it, the better we follow it.

It is Mother's Day weekend, and we remember the blessing mothers can be. When they're a blessing, we learn by listening to them, too. Listening to a mom's advice keeps us safe. Listening to a mom's voice helps us find her when we're lost. Listening to a mom's voice helps keep us calm. Listening to a mom's voice teaches us what we need to know.

We hear the shepherd's voice as we read the Bible. We hear our shepherd's voice in the voice of fellow Christians sharing the love of Jesus with us and with others. We hear our shepherd's voice in the words of forgiveness we hear in church. Listening to the shepherd's voice keeps us together and keeps us safe.

We, too, are saved by the Gospel. We are among the sheep of God, not because of what we've done or who we are. All of us here who have been saved by Jesus, who became a sheep like us, and lived among us, and died for us, and rose again for us. He did all of that to keep us safe, so no one could snatch us out of his hand.

God has established his kingdom in Jesus Christ. Through the gospel, God has called you into that kingdom and, though this world and Satan himself should fight against it, that kingdom will never be taken

away. As the end of the semester has come for ISU students and approaches for younger students, as life continues to be full of change, as pain still comes into our lives, remember that you are all sheep of the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for you, to forgive you for all the things that will go wrong, to sustain you and lead you in the ways that you should go. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, this Jesus is with you. Like that early Christian fresco of Jesus the Good Shepherd. Through him, you live. In him, you die. And, by him, you will be raised to eternal life.

This is the Good News of the Good Shepherd: Christ laid down his life for us when we couldn't, and wouldn't lay down our lives. When you fear that you have wandered far from the fold, Jesus finds you and brings you back. And when you know that you have nothing, absolutely nothing, to offer God, he offers you himself. This has nothing to do with what kind of sheep we've been. It has everything to do with the love and mercy of the Good Shepherd. He's the Good Shepherd, and he lays down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd is with you and before you and in you—and for you. The Good Shepherd keeps His flock safe. That's a promise you can trust.

Pastor David Beagley  
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center, Ames, IA  
4th Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday) May 12, 2019