

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Good Shepherd Sunday Easter 4  
May 12, 2019

## **We the Sheep** **John 10:22-30**

Today is sometimes called “Good Shepherd Sunday” because we traditionally read about the image of Jesus as the good shepherd on the fourth Sunday of Easter. The images of shepherds and sheep are rich ones that connect throughout the scriptures.

When we consider Jesus’ claim to be the “good shepherd,” which he makes in verse 11 of John 10, we might picture a pastoral scene with green grass and a flowing stream, much as is depicted in Psalm 23. This is a valid image, but it is only one component of the shepherd metaphor. Like so much that happens in John’s gospel, there is a deeper meaning, and that deeper meaning is quite radical.

First, let’s think about shepherds in the rest of the Bible. Shepherds were not the most honored members of society in Jesus’ day. They were usually dirty and smelly from hanging out with sheep all the time, and some of them were rowdy and crude.

But the two greatest heroes in all the Hebrew Bible were shepherds: Moses was living as an exile from Egypt, tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, in Midian, when God called him to go back to Egypt and demand the liberation of his people from Pharaoh. And David was tending his father's flock when Samuel the prophet came to anoint the next king of Israel. Even though David was the youngest of the eight brothers, Samuel would not start the celebration until he arrived. So, when referring to himself as a shepherd, Jesus is following close on the heels of those giants of the Jewish faith.

But rather than just a reference back to great figures of the Bible, the image of the shepherd is an analogy throughout scripture. The first time it is used, God himself is referred to as a shepherd. In Genesis, Jacob describes God as the one who has been "my shepherd all my life to this day."<sup>1</sup> God had led Jacob's journey, as a shepherd leads a flock. God, as *the* shepherd, uses humans to shepherd God's sheep. In 2 Samuel, God referred to the tribal leaders who led the people of Israel like shepherds.<sup>2</sup>

More often, though, the kings of Israel were called the shepherds of God's sheep, the people of Israel. And the kings were sometimes noted for their failure to tend their subjects. In Ezekiel 34, the prophet is told to "prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. ..."<sup>3</sup>

The Lord accuses the “shepherds” of feeding themselves instead of the sheep and of allowing the sheep to become scattered, rather than going to “search or seek for them.”<sup>4</sup> God, therefore, states that he is against the shepherds and makes an amazing promise: “I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out ...”<sup>5</sup> — and it goes on like this. God is promising to do what the “shepherds” would not. And this is squarely in line with Isaiah 40, where that prophet proclaims a similar promise: “The Lord God comes with might. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”<sup>6</sup>

It is with this background in mind that we can truly appreciate the bold statements that Jesus makes about himself in John 10. If Jesus is the good shepherd who gathers the sheep together, who lays down his life for the sheep, who saves the sheep, unlike the hired hand who runs away in the face of danger — if Jesus is claiming all that for himself, then he is claiming to fulfill what Isaiah and Ezekiel prophesied. But we do not have to infer this meaning. Jesus makes the connection explicit in the passage we read this morning: At verse 30, Jesus says, “The Father and I are one.”

John’s gospel, more than any other book in the New Testament, presents bold statements like this about the divinity of Jesus. Jesus is God.<sup>7</sup> He is the good shepherd who feeds and gathers the sheep, in contrast to the merely human leaders who looked out only for themselves.

The image of the shepherd, then, is one that runs throughout the whole of scripture as a leader who tends to sheep — people who, without proper leadership, would starve and scatter and get eaten by predators. God claims the identity of the shepherd, and that claim is fulfilled in Jesus.

So, let us think about the sheep now. The sheep seem to be helpless without the shepherd. I do not have a lot of personal experience with sheep. We did not raise sheep on our farm, but a neighboring farm had sheep in a nearby pasture. It was especially nice to investigate that pasture in the spring when the lambs were being born. There are few sights more peaceful than watching the lambs leap around, following their mothers without a care in the world.

This brings us back to the pastoral image of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.”<sup>8</sup> It’s interesting that we tend to hear this psalm mostly at funerals. This is probably because it traditionally includes a reference to “the valley of the shadow of death.” The New Revised Standard Version translates this as “the darkest valley,” which sounds right to me because I think this psalm says way more about life than it does about death.

In our gospel passage for today, Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” That’s how you tell a sheep of Jesus’ fold from a sheep from a different one. YouTube has videos of sheep coming when the shepherd calls. They really do know one voice from another. They listen to one and ignore the other. We have that option too. There are plenty of voices calling out to us. We could choose to follow any of them, but only one voice leads to life.

We experience God’s grace in three ways: There is prevenient grace, or the grace that is extended to us before we even know we need it. We can liken this to the voice of the shepherd calling out to us even before we know to which flock we belong. Justifying grace is that which enables us to finally, after following other voices, discern the voice of our true shepherd and follow. Sanctifying grace is that which enables us to continually hear our true shepherd’s voice even amid the daily cacophony of other voices.

This is our choice, then: We can hear and follow the false shepherds that Ezekiel prophesied against. These voices will only lead to death. Those shepherds are only fending for themselves. Perhaps worse still, we could follow our own voice. This will get us scattered quickly! But if we want to be like those lambs in the pasture, leaping around and living carelessly, we need to follow the voice of the true shepherd. God said that he would be our shepherd. Jesus said that he was the fulfillment of that promise.

Following the voice of Jesus leads to eternal life and to better life here and now.

We will still find ourselves in the “darkest valley” from time to time, but our shepherd has a rod and a staff to protect us. Psalm 23 is not about death — it’s about having abundant life under the care of our shepherd, both in good times and in difficult times.

Jacob experienced God as his shepherd, leading him throughout his life. Way back in Genesis, then, we are given a glimpse of the relationship believers are called to have with their shepherd. The Bible teaches us that the relationship can go haywire in a variety of ways. First, there can be shepherds who distort or drown out the voice of the one true shepherd. We the sheep must be careful when discerning which human shepherds we follow.

We can also ignore the voice of the shepherd and go our own way. There might be people in your life who you think are doing just that. Often parents pray for their children who have gone astray. Remember that the shepherd is a pursuer. The good shepherd continually calls out to the lost sheep so that, in time, that “sheep” will hear and respond. Then we have this great promise in John 10 that no one can snatch us out of the shepherd’s hand.

We the sheep can find joy and peace following the Good Shepherd's voice, or we can find darkness and strife following another. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, let us resolve ourselves to, once again, listen for the voice of our Good Shepherd above all others!

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 48:15.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 7:7.

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 34:2.

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 34:6.

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 34:11.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 40:10-11.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, John 20:28.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 23:1-2.