

John 10:11-18

“I Am: The Good Shepherd”

This morning I am going to ask you to stand and remain standing if you have or have *ever* had one of the following characteristics: poor eyesight, stubbornness, or a tendency to overeat. If you find safety in numbers, like to be part of the crowd or consider yourself outgoing, gregarious or social. Please stand if you feel like you are a follower rather than a leader, are frightened easily, do not like loud noises, tend to wander off when you are out with family or friends, cannot relax when you are stressed or grind your teeth when you sleep. Well, those of us who are standing have the same characteristics of sheep! (ask everyone to be seated)

Perhaps that is why Jesus felt it was important to overemphasize our need for a shepherd by spending so much time in the Gospel of John teaching about it. After all, two of the seven “I am” statements found in John’s gospel deal with this concept. Last week, we learned that Jesus said “I am the gate” which referred to the opening of the sheepfold or place where sheep sleep. In a continuation of last week’s verses, today we hear that Jesus is our Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd had long been promised to God’s chosen people, the Israelites. The prophet Isaiah says of God: “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.” (Is 40:11). Ezekiel said, “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” (Ezekiel 20:24). John’s Revelation contains more than 30 references to God as our shepherd and Jesus as the Lamb of God. Indeed, when John the Baptist saw Jesus, he cried, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” (John 1:29).

Those same children of God were often referred to as God's sheep in numerous verses. In the very familiar Psalm 23, in the words that provided our call to worship Psalm 100 and again when Isaiah proclaims: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray" (Is 53:6). I guess that's why almost all of us were standing just a few minutes ago. It is safe to assume that everyone of us here has been lost, will be lost or has the tendency to become lost at one time or another.

When Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd, I lay down my life for my sheep" we are given one of the most integral statements of our faith. With this one phrase, we know that Jesus claims us because his Father gave us to him and that he bought us with his own blood. In the Old Testament, sheep were taken as a sacrifice to the Temple to be offered to God. In other words, the sheep died for the shepherd or the one who brought it. Under the new covenant of Jesus, the shepherd dies for the sheep.

And just as God's call to us as sheep is totally an act of grace – that is to say that we have done nothing to deserve it – so is Jesus' insistence to search for us when we are lost. Or perhaps, just when we have *not yet been found*. My own life story is a case in point.

My parents were both raised in the church but, as young adults and new parents in the 60's, church was just not a priority for them. They did join John Knox Presbyterian when I was about 6 but did not really attend. As a child, Easter to me meant a new dress, purse and white gloves and there are numerous pictures of me in different stages of early childhood modeling my new outfit. This was about the only time I remember going to church. If we prayed or read the Bible, have I no memory of it. I learned the Christmas story from watching "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and can still recite Luke 2 from the King James Version, just a Linus did with his blanket wrapped around his head.

But I distinctly remember the first time I went to children's choir, when I was 8. My mother had heard that the newly hired Director of Music was starting a children's choir and, since I had inherited her love of singing, decided to take me. I can still picture the room, the choir director waving her arms like they were angel's wings. I can still hear some of the songs that we sang. I learned the Nicene Creed when I was 9 because we sang it.

And even at this very moment, I can recall feeling like I had come home when I was in that building. I just knew in my heart that I belonged there. Eventually, after hearing my friends talk about Sunday School, I asked if I could go. My mother would drop me off and come back an hour later. When I asked to stay for church, she came back two hours later. I was literally raised by the church and went by myself until I was about 12.

At that time, someone discovered that my mother also enjoyed music. She was asked to help with the Jr. Hi Choir and said "Yes" and began going to church with me. When the time came, I got active in Youth group, went to "Eva Good" church camp every year from 5th – 10th grade, and "accepted Christ" as my savior at camp when I was 11.

I was 15 when we planned to worship in the newly built sanctuary for the first time. I told my dad that it would mean a lot to me if he and my little brother would come that Sunday but if they didn't, I wouldn't bother them about it again. When we got up Sunday morning, Daddy and my brother were dressed for church. I have said many times that I wish I could remember what John Livingston preached on that day, because my whole family has been active ever since. My dad was ordained as an Elder three years later. He is currently serving his 5th or 6th term, although at a different church. Both my brother and mother are Elders as well and all three have held various leadership positions in the church since that day.

It is clear to me that God sought me out that first night of children's choir. Or even before. I know that He literally called me by name. I just went to sing, but what I received was the birth of a faith that has given me much joy over the year, has sustained me through many trials and made me who I am today. I can say that I have never felt so loved as I do in church but also that the greatest sorrow I ever experienced was when the church let me down. Like all sheep, I have wandered away, doubted, ranted at God, shaken my fist at the sky and wondered where God was.

No matter the circumstances, the Good Shepherd has been there – waiting, watching, guiding, filling me with both peace and unrest. The Shepherd has never left me or given up on me, no matter how far I have wandered. While my family has given up on me and I have even given up on myself, The Good Shepherd never has. He is always there, with his crook, pulling me back into the fold – sometimes gently and sometimes with painful force.

Why? Why did I feel so at home that night when I was 8? Why have I gone back to the place when I was so filled with love – some might think they had all they need and not return. Why, when the people of the church turned against me, used me as a scapegoat to correct a terrible injustice, did I still turn back to the same fold?

Friends, it is pure grace. The thief has tried to steal me quietly, the robber has tried to abuse me violently, but the Shepherd has never left my side. And the shepherd will never leave your side either. All you have to do is acknowledge that you are God's sheep – totally dependent on the goodness, love and forgiveness of God - even when you cannot see it.

Now if you don't remember anything else that I say this morning, remember this. There is **ABSOLUTELY NOTHING SPECIAL ABOUT ME**. Other than the beautiful fact that I am created in the image of God. There is **NO DIFFERENCE** between my story and yours. We are

all underserving yet the Good Shepherd laid down his life for each one here. All we must do is believe.

And while we cannot earn this love, this incredible gift, there is a very important verse in this passage that tells us how we can show our gratitude for it. Jesus says: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” (v.16) In his book He Walks With Me minister Warren Wiersbe says: “Divine election is not a deterrent to evangelism but one of the dynamics behind evangelism.” In other words, we are called to salvation to follow and to serve. We are pulled into the flock so that those who have not joined the fold can find it through OUR stories, through OUR faith experiences, through OUR willingness to share the successes and failures of our lives.

Today, it breaks my heart that so many people try to become the shepherd when it is clearly not our job. God calls us to *witness* to the lost, not to save them. And WE do not know who those lost are. But God does. WE do not know other peoples’ innermost thoughts, but God does. WE do not know their circumstances or their backgrounds. But God does. WE do not know their hearts. But God does.

You see, only God knows WHO he has yet to bring into the fold and since we do not, we are called to witness to *everyone*. To *include* everyone. To *accept* everyone because they TOO are made in the image of God. Jesus alone is the Gate and calls people in and calls people out. He uses our voices, our hands, our arms. But ONLY the Good Shepherd knows who will stay.

My shepherd knows me and understands me thoroughly. He knows what make me tick, what makes me skittish and how far I am willing to witness and to wander. Yet that Shepherd still loves me. You know the person I portray, the thoughts that I share, the stories that I am

willing to expose to you and love me if you relate to them or find them helpful in your own life. God knew me before God formed me in my mother's womb and you did not.

So how dare any person, any church, any denomination, indeed any faith presume that we have the knowledge of who has a place in the fold and who does not. As a witness to the lost, we don't know who God's elect are, nor should we worry ourselves about these eternal mysteries. Our commission is to share the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit and trust the Lord to call out those who are His.

But friends, here is what we DO know. In the beginning, after God created the Heavens and the Earth and all that was in it, it was too beautiful for God to enjoy alone. And even though he knew we would screw it up, God made humankind in the very image of God so that we could have fellowship with God and each other. God created God's sheep and called us into the sheepfold.

And when it was apparent that we are ALL prone to wander, have poor eyesight, like to overeat, follow the crowd and grit out teeth in our sleep because we cannot control life, God became a human Shepherd that sheep could really see and hear and smell and touch. A shepherd who got tired and sweated and laughed and had sore feet and drank wine at weddings and cried when his friend died. And that shepherd laid down his life. He obediently carried a cross up the hill of salvation. That shepherd bore the pain that my sins and yours caused him and went to Hell and battled the devil for three days so that you and I will never have to. In return, all we have to do is let the Shepherd's crook pull us in the right direction.

Wiersbe again say, "Most of the trouble in our world is caused by people who ignore Christ and insist on having it our own way, and this can and often does happen in our local

churches.” And friends, those are the sheep that Jesus still hangs on the cross for. You and me. Every day.

You see, the grace of God means that the longer we know Jesus Christ, the more helpless we realize we are. That is called faith. Sometimes we forget. And God reminds us through Scripture, or a song, or a rainbow, or the laugh of a child or the voice of a stranger or in our deepest silence that it is God who made us. And not we ourselves!

When Jesus Christ is our Shepherd, our future is secure. We have nothing to fear.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

Nazareth Presbyterian Church, March 24, 2019

This morning, we're going to hear some sounds. Tell me if you can identify them. (A piano or guitar chord). What was that? (Allow the children to answer.) Yes, the piano playing a chord. Now, what is this? (Ring the bell. Allow the children to respond.) Yes, a bell is ringing.

Now listen carefully. Someone will say something and I want to see if you know who is saying it. Listen. (Someone from the audience says, "Follow me.") Who said that? Did you recognize what they said? (Allow children to respond.) That was harder to know who was speaking, but the person said, "Follow me," didn't he.

Now listen carefully again. Follow me! Did you recognize who said that? (Allow children to respond.) Yes, I said, "Follow me." Now, let's listen to our Bible story. It's about the Good Shepherd.

Sheep are pretty dirty. They get thorns and dirt in their woolly coats, and they can't get them out on their own. They don't have a sense of direction, so even if they drank from a stream this morning, by evening, they won't remember how to get to get to the water. They need a shepherd.

A shepherd takes care of sheep. A shepherd leads sheep and helps them when they are in trouble. A shepherd pulls stickers out of a sheep's wool and takes care of them if they get sick. Sheep need a shepherd to lead them to water and food. Sometimes they even need someone who will even make them lie down in a safe place and rest.

In our Bible, there are many stories about sheep. Moses took care of sheep for a long time in the wilderness. Before he became king, a boy named David cared for his father's sheep. He even protected them from a bear and a lion.

Our lesson today tells us that Jesus is OUR Good Shepherd. In one of the stories he told his disciples, he says, **"I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and I'm known by my own"** (vs. 14). He defends us. Sometimes we lose direction, too and he helps us get on the right path.

You can hear a lot of people talking, but you will only recognize the voice of someone close to you, like your parents, your brother or sister, or your teacher. Earlier, it was hard to tell who said, "Follow me," because we didn't know the person who said it.

Jesus wants us to follow him, doesn't he? He's the Good Shepherd who will guide us, help us and teach us. He helps us when we are in trouble, but he is always with us. He speaks to us through the Holy Bible. Let's follow Jesus.

PRAYER: God, again, we thank you for Jesus. Thank you that he is the Good Shepherd who helps us as we lose direction or need help. May we follow the Good Shepherd. Amen.

God our Shepherd, you call us to follow where you lead. Give us ears to hear and know your voice and the courage and strength to lay down our lives for one another, as even you laid down your life for us.

We pray the time when you gather to yourself the all people of the world so there will be one flock under your reign. Forgive us for our hatred and divisions. We bring to you the brave voices who cry out for freedom, those prepared to stand up and be heard without counting the cost. We pray for those who serve in our military and as first responders to protect us and bring us safety and healing. Be with those who have been imprisoned, oppressed or looked down upon because of their race, their nationality, their faith or simply because they are different. We pray for those whose lives and rights are sacrificed in the name of power and greed. We ask that the leaders of our nation and all other nations will seek your wisdom and humility as they govern.

Lord Jesus, because you are our Shepherd, we know that we find safety and security within your embrace. We know that we are precious in your sight. We are grateful for the body of Christ as Nazareth and for the warmth of family and belonging that we experience here. May we continue to grow and be nurtured together as one flock, so that we are equipped to share your love with others.

Good Shepherd, within your embrace we find comfort and healing. We bring to you those who are weak, or struggling with physical, mental or spiritual health. You are the great healer, and we pray for healing of mind, body and spirit and for those we now name in the silence of our hearts.

Lord, we thank you for the love of the Good Shepherd who knows us by name.
We pray for ourselves that we might hear your call and follow your way of love.
We make all our prayers in Christ's name. Amen.