

Psalm 23
John 10:11-18

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
Midway Presbyterian Church
April 25, 2021

Each Knows and Is Known

Introduction to the Psalm

The best-loved and best-known Psalm invites us to a life of trust and assurance. God is seen as a caring shepherd. Listen to these familiar words from the Twenty-Third Psalm....

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

While many of us have not had any direct experience with sheep and shepherds, the images conveyed in scripture can still carry a great force, much as they did for ancient Israel. In our Gospel Lesson for this Fourth Sunday of Easter, Jesus declares that he is the good shepherd, who provides comfort and security to every member of the flock; yet at a great cost to our Lord. Listen to these words from John 10:11-18...

Sermon

In the sermon today I want to lift up three things: First, the contrast between the good shepherd and the hireling. Secondly, the personal knowledge that Jesus has of the members of his flock. And thirdly, his concern for other sheep “not of this fold.”

First, the good shepherd. The Old Testament is rich in pastoral symbolism, with Psalm 23 being the most familiar—“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” In Ezekiel 34 the divine care for the sheep of the flock follows a description of false shepherds. In John 10 Jesus aligns himself with the Old Testament tradition that viewed the congregation of Israel as requiring an appointed leader, lest the people become like “sheep without a shepherd.”

(Numbers 27:17)

For a good shepherd it was a natural thing to defend his flock against all threats, even if that required laying down his life for the sheep. At night, sheep were often gathered into a sheep pen to protect them from thieves, weather, or wild animals. These pens could be caves, sheds, or open areas surrounded by walls of stone or branches. And the shepherd would often sleep across the doorway of the pen to guard his sheep.

But for the hireling—the hired hand—it was another matter. The Hireling Shepherd is an 1851 painting by William Holman Hunt, in which we see a shepherd neglecting his flock in favor of an attractive country girl. William Barclay says that a real shepherd was born to the task. And as soon as he was old enough, he was sent out with the flocks. Thus did he grow into the vocation, the calling of being a shepherd. The sheep became his friends and companions; he knew each sheep and each sheep knew him. But the false shepherd did not come into the job as a calling. He had no sense of responsibility for the sheep; it was just a job. And if a wolf or lion or bear came along, he would flee and leave the sheep to fend for themselves.

In Acts 20 we find Paul warning the elders of the church in Ephesus that grievous wolves would come, not sparing the flock. These wolves attacked, and the hireling shepherd fled and left the flock to the wolves. Zechariah notes it as a characteristic of a false shepherd that he makes no attempt to gather together the scattered sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who loves his sheep, cares for them, and one day lays down his life for them.

Our appreciation of this good shepherd figure is deepened by understanding the two Greek words for “good.” First, there is *agathós*, which simply describes the moral quality of a thing. But there is a second word, *kalós*, which means that a thing or a person is not only good, but in the goodness there is a quality of winsomeness and loveliness. In our lesson from John’s

gospel, the word used to describe Jesus as the good shepherd is *kalós*. So that in Jesus there is more than efficiency, and more than fidelity; there is a certain loveliness.

Sometimes in a village or town people speak about *the good doctor*. When they speak like that they are not thinking only of the doctor's efficiency and skill as a physician; they are thinking of the sympathy and the kindness and the graciousness which he brings with him, and which makes him the friend of all. In the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd there is loveliness as well as strength and power. (*Commentary on The Gospel of John*, William Barclay, p. 72)

The Good Shepherd is like the good doctor—not anything like the hireling.

Secondly, let us look at the personal knowledge that Jesus has of the members of his flock.

I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me
and I know the Father. (John 10:14)

Many of us have just completed the annual ritual of filing our income taxes. Pages and pages of numbers. Finally, with a mixture of relief and uncertainty, we get the completed forms in the mail and hope that all goes well. It would be nice to think that someone there at the IRS knew you, someone who handled your returns personally and would contact you if there was a problem. But, of course, that is not the way it is. They just feed your numbers into a computer and the computer decides on the basis of those numbers and last year's numbers, and the numbers expected, whether there is an issue. And if there is an issue, you get a confusing letter.

The IRS knows us by a tax number. The state knows us by a driver's license number. The bank knows us by an account number. The employer knows us by a Social Security number. On and on it goes for you, for me, for everybody. They all know our numbers, but does anyone know us?

Well, our Gospel Lesson assures us that the Good Shepherd knows each member of his flock. If one is lost, he goes to find it, puts it on his shoulders, and carries it home. (See Lk. 15:1-7) Augustine said that often Christ's sheep do not know themselves; are not at all sure that

such wandering creatures as they, can really belong to a flock from which they are so often missing and from which they so frequently keep straying. “All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us had turned to his own way...” (Isa. 53:6a) But, says Christ, “I know my own.”

At a conference some years ago a prominent minister came to Dr. Charles G. Trumbull, editor of *The Sunday School Times*, and confessed that he felt defeated. He did not have peace or joy in his life, nor victory over sin; nor was there evidence of the spiritual fruit that he longed to bear. Following a conversation that revealed the minister was surrendered in the sense of wanting only God’s will in his life, Dr. Trumbull asked, “Do you believe the first verse of the 23rd Psalm?”

“That is one of my favorite texts. I have preached on it many a time. Of course, I believe it.”

“What kind of shepherd is He? Does He take care of some of the needs of the sheep or of all the needs of the sheep?”

The minister hesitated; he was keen and knew where the question was leading, as he answered, “Of course, He takes care of all of them.”

“Now look out! You are getting yourself in a corner, and it is the most blessed corner you were ever in.”

Well, that minister knelt down, and for the first time in his life he really believed that “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” And from that crisis he rose in radiant victory.

Another minister, Henry Williams Baker, in 1868 wrote as a hymn the following words:

The King of love my shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His
And He is mine forever.

Upon his death bed, the dying words of Henry Baker were the third stanza of this hymn:

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love He sought me,
And on His shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.

So close and personal is this relationship between Christ and his own that in as striking a metaphor as can be found, Jesus dares compare it to the relationship which exists between the Father and the Son. This intimacy is surely a beautiful part of the gospel story.

“Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” is a familiar spiritual that originated during the period of slavery, but was not published until 1867.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
 Nobody knows but Jesus.
 Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
 Glory, Hallelujah!

Yes, our Good shepherd knows us, knows our name, knows our troubles, and with this knowledge he offers his life for us. It is not a gift of ignorance, or a gift based on a false perception of who we are. Rather, it is a gift offered to us exactly as we are: With all of our brokenness, our needs, our hopes, our despair, our sin. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus says that God knows even the number of hairs on our head. (12:7) Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows us, and is known by us.

Third and finally, we note Jesus’ concern for other sheep “not of this fold.”

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. (10:16)

Precisely who these other sheep are, we are not sure. Most commentators see this verse as a reference to the Gentile mission, a concern clearly seen elsewhere in John’s Gospel. In the very first chapter we find Jesus being identified by John the Baptist as, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (1:29b) People tend to build fences around their own group, but Jesus refuses to be limited by any such barriers.

Egerton Young was the first missionary to the Indians in the Saskatchewan province of Canada. When he told them of the love of God the Father, it was like a new revelation. When Young had presented his message, an old chief said:

“When you spoke of the great Spirit just now, did I hear you say, ‘Our Father?’”

“Yes,” said Egerton Young.

“That is very new and sweet to me,” said the chief. “We never thought of the great Spirit as Father. We heard Him in the thunder; we saw Him in the lightning, the tempest and the blizzard, and we were afraid. So when you tell us that the great Spirit is *our Father*, that is very beautiful to us.” The old man paused, and then he went on, as a glimpse of glory suddenly shone on him. “Missionary, did you say that the great Spirit is *your* Father?”

“Yes,” said the missionary.

“And,” asked the chief, “did you say that He is *the Indians’* Father?”

“I did,” answered the missionary.

“Then,” said the old chief, like a man on whom a dawn of joy had burst, “*you and I are brothers!*”

My friends, unity is found in knowing oneself as a child of God, and then living as a child of God the Heavenly Father. In the world there is division between nation and nation; in the nation there is the division between group and group. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father, can cross the barriers and overcome the differences.

Thus does this lesson from the 10th chapter of John’s Gospel, lead us to see Jesus as The King of Love, The Good Shepherd of the flock, who knows and cares for his sheep, including others not of this fold. This Good Shepherd can bind up our wounds and carry us home. This Good shepherd can enable us to see one another as brothers and sisters. Only this Lamb of God can take away the sin of the world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen