

I am the Good Shepherd
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2017
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Text: Psalm 23 and John 10:1-21

The night breeze feels cool, a refreshing relief from the hot sun and dry heat of the scorching summer day. As the sun slowly settles behind the hills to the west, rays glinting off the rock, a calm and cool blankets the earth, and blankets you, signaling the end to yet another day of toil. The swifts swoop down, picking insects on the wing. Off in the distance jackals yip. The doves in the olive trees coo and flutter. The earth seems to ease into another evening of rest. But far off in the dusky distance you hear what sounds like the howl of a wolf. As you fear, it may be another long night.

Almost all the sheep are finally rounded up. Safe for now in their earthen enclosure, protected from thieves and wolves by the thick circular wall of dirt topped with thorny briars that your grandfather built long ago, the sheep seem content and safe, secure and at home. Stupid four-legged creatures that they are, they need all the help they can get. As animals go, their IQ is lower than a pig or a crow or even an ass. But where would you or your people be without sheep, for without their meat and wool you would have little food or clothing.

Despite their stupidity, you have taken a liking to them. Indeed, you have taken such a shine to your 40 sheep that you have given each a name. Long-ears, Pink-nose, Little-runt. And despite their limited intelligence, they seem--these sheep--to understand you when you call them. They appear to know their names. At least they know your voice. Your voice seems to calm them and soothe them.

They come to your voice. You and your voice lead them to sweet grasses and cool water and a safe shelter for the night.

But one sheep remains missing. Thirty-nine are here, in the thorn-topped pen. But one is missing. And with the darkness quickly descending you have little time to look. And then again you hear it, louder and clearer this time--the call of a wolf. You hoped for sleep this night, but you may not get it. One sheep—Slow-Foot--remains missing.

"Why did I have to be a shepherd?" you ask yourself. Why a shepherd? For there are far too many late nights. Often away from home at night, unable to look after your wife and children, many presume you are a dishonorable man. Many presume you find comfort with other women. Others think you a thief for grazing your sheep on their land. A trespasser, they say you are, allowing your herd to roam their fields. But you are neither a dishonorable husband nor a thieving trespasser. But you have to admit it: you are a shepherd, and you are despised. Lumped with camel drivers, tanners, sailors, butchers, and donkey tenders in the same low caste social group, you get little respect among your people. A shepherd. Why would anyone want to be that? Who can trust them? Good news of great joy--from a shepherd? Come on. Get real.

Anger wells up within. Why should you be despised? Why for being a shepherd should you be viewed as dirt? You are no hired hand. These sheep are yours. You care for them. You protect them. You guide them. You are honorable, hard-working, trustworthy. You are a shepherd, and for that you are despised, but you are a good shepherd. You strive to be a good shepherd the way the great King David, himself once upon a time a shepherd, wrote of God in the famous psalm—Psalm 23--as our good shepherd: a shepherd who leads us to green pastures and still waters, a shepherd whose rod and staff comfort us when

evil--the wolf, the bandit--encircles us. Why should you, a shepherd, be despised? Even God, King David tells us, is like a shepherd.

The sun has now set, casting its purple-pink glow over the silhouetted horizon. Bone-weary you long for food and sleep. But you remember the missing sheep. Stupid sheep. How did it get lost this time? You dare not venture out in search of her now, for you are alone and the earthen pen has no gate but you. There is no door to the pen, for you, the shepherd, sleep at the entrance to the enclosure. You are the gate. If you were to leave, the wolves could easily enter the pen and scatter or kill the sheep. So you call to your missing one, Slow-Foot. You call her name. And you hope she hears and comes.

The night sky, filled with luminous stars and constellations—Vega and Lyra the Lyre, Deneb and Cygnus the Swan, Altair and Aquila the Eagle—the night sky begins to reveal itself. As you look and listen for your lost sheep, despite yourself your mind is filled with the words and images of the past few days. For you have seen and heard the rabbi Jesus. And this crazy carpenter from Nazareth is most amazing. He truly teaches as one with authority, not like the scribes and Pharisees, who always use the Torah to divide and separate, to put everything in its place, to keep things clean and pure. This Jesus seems not to care about such purity codes. He even speaks of shepherds--indeed he even spoke to you! But for this and so much more he is in deep trouble. Just the other day you heard that Jesus healed a man born blind. He made a paste of spit and dirt and put it on the man's eyes. The blind beggar washed in the pool of Siloam and came back able to see. The shock and shine of light and life came alive in his eyes. The sighting, it was, a miracle. Of it Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." They say he does such signs often. They say he is a prophet. They whisper Jesus is the Messiah.

But the Pharisees didn't like it one bit. For, you see, the sighting happened on the sabbath. It was a violation of the Torah rules. It was an unclean act. Jesus, the Pharisees say, is a sinner, for he does not observe the sabbath. Indeed, the Jewish authorities did not believe the healed man was really blind. They refused to believe the miracle. Indeed, they even questioned the man's parents, threatening to put them out of the synagogue if they confessed Jesus as Messiah. And when the healed man refused to condemn Jesus, the Pharisees drove him out--they threw him out of the synagogue. But who, really, is blind? Jesus or the Pharisees? For how can a "sinner" perform such signs? If Jesus were not from God, he could do nothing. The Pharisees claim to see, to lead the people rightly, but who really is blind?

Who really is the true shepherd? Our prophet Jeremiah long ago railed against false shepherds--those who abandon the sheep and look after only themselves. In contrast he longed for the coming of a true shepherd, a good shepherd, who would lead us and guide us, God's people-- binding up the injured, healing the sick, strengthening the weak. And the prophet Zechariah spoke woes to the worthless shepherd who deserts his flock. Zechariah yearned for a shepherd-king who sacrifices himself for the sake of the sheep. The Pharisees claim to be good shepherds, but how can that be? They are not true shepherds. All of us "people of the land" know this. The Pharisees care only for their rules, for keeping kosher, for preserving purity.

Yes, the crazy carpenter from Nazereth spoke to you, a shepherd. You were leading your sheep out of the sheepfold just as the sun was shimmying up the sky beyond the eastern horizon when Jesus and a great crowd came down the dusty village road. Yes, Jesus spoke to you and he spoke of you, a shepherd. Like Ezekiel of old, Jesus spoke of a good shepherd, a true shepherd, a faithful

shepherd, who did not allow the flock to wander uncared for in the mountains. He looked at you, asked you your name, but he spoke also to those around him.

Amen, amen I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a bandit. But the one who enters by the gate is the true shepherd of the sheep. The sheep hear his voice as he calls them by name and leads them out to green pastures and still waters. And the sheep follow him wherever he goes for they know his voice. The sheep will never, ever follow a stranger, but will rather run the other way, for the stranger's voice is unknown to them. They fear it.

Indeed, I, Jesus, am the gate for the sheep. I am the good shepherd who bodily forms the entrance to the sheepfold, keeping the ravenous wolves and roaming bandits at bay.

I am the gate. Those who came before me, claiming to be shepherds, were nothing but thieves and bandits. They came only to steal and kill and destroy. But whoever enters by me will be saved, freely coming and going and finding pasture. I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.

I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

There was fire in his words, but love in his eyes as, speaking, he looked at you and your sheep and your life. You, the shepherd, no longer felt despised, unclean, ashamed. For here was the light of the world. Here was the sight-giving savior. Here was the true good shepherd.

But as with the man born blind, here too Jesus evoked controversy, stirred up trouble, made enemies. The Jewish authorities were divided because of his words. Many thought him mad, out of his mind. Others believed him to be

demon-possessed. But yet others said, "Can a demon open the eyes of a blind man?" And at the moment Jesus said, "I and the Father are one," some of them took up stones to kill him, for in so identifying himself with the living God, he had, in their eyes, committed blasphemy.

But somehow he escaped. Somehow Jesus eluded their murderous grasp. For now. But for how long? Such a rabble-rouser, such an enemy-maker, such a rule-breaking miracle-worker isn't long for this world. Such a shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep, will eventually come to ruin. Such a good shepherd might get hurt, or worse, stoned, or worse yet, find his way to a Roman cross. Sleeping in the doorway, being the gate to the sheepfold, being a good shepherd just might get you killed.

You didn't sleep well that night, at least at first. Even though that day the sheep had grazed on sweet grass and you found water for them to drink, there was still a sheep gone missing. At about midnight, you heard a weak bleat and in wandered Slow-Foot, the lost sheep—a bit battered and bruised but alive and now safe. You picked her up and gave her a great big hug while also chastising her for wandering off and causing you such worry. Now, back at the entrance, much relieved, you slumped down—a human gate to the sheepfold—and fell quickly to sleep. That night—the rest of the night--you dreamed of a good shepherd.

Jesus says, I am the gate. And he also says, I am the good shepherd. He is the good shepherd who is the gate to the sheepfold, literally laying his body in the place of the gate to protect us his sheep from thieves and bandits and all manner of misfortune. So speaks Jesus in John's gospel, echoing the famous 23rd psalm. We do well to listen and to hear and to live in such a way that our believing is made real in our everyday lives. For such is Pentecost faith—a faith

empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to God's Son Jesus the Good Shepherd.

So never forget that Jesus, our good shepherd, calls you by name, leads you to green pastures and still waters, and walks with you through your own dark valleys of the shadow of death. Never forget that Jesus, our good shepherd, sits at a feast table with you and your enemies, anoints you with fresh olive oil, and causes your cup to overflow with joy and delight. Never forget that Jesus, our good shepherd, will travel with you, goodness and mercy hard on your heels like our puppy Lily shadowing my wife Celaine, for the length of your days—your whole life long.

Jesus says: I am the good shepherd.

Remember this and go forth to live in peace.

So be it. Amen.