

Sermon for Sunday, August 16, 2009
Dr. Dan Doriani

JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD
John 10:1-18

A man has lost his job for the third time in four years. He is skilled, diligent and a team player, but he is baffled. Is he doing something wrong? What does the future hold? He hates moving, but he may need to move his family again. But this he knows: "The Lord is my shepherd."

A young woman is thinking hard about marriage. There is a man in her life, but she can't get serious with him – let alone get married – unless he makes major changes. Meanwhile, there is another fellow around. She could check off more boxes in the "components of a good spouse" list, but there is no spark. What should she do? It's good to know the Lord is her shepherd.

The Lord is Shepherd doesn't mean the Lord gently guides everyone all the time. Lots of people want no part of God's guidance and he does not lead them.

Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." The good shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. His sheep follow him because they know his voice" (10:3-4, 11). The Lord is your shepherd if you hear his voice and want to follow.

Not everyone wants to follow. Some are led by their ambitions. Some are led by their friends. They discuss what their friends discuss and do what their friends want to do.

Some people want you to follow them, not the Lord. Who might that be? A political leader? Business leader? Cultural leader? Yes. Also a group I'll call "The peddler of addiction." We all know that tobacco and many drugs and porn are addictive. But there is more. The gambling industry, the designers of video games, even some forms of on-line shopping appear to be designed to promote addiction. Each has a hunt, the thrill of a quest for victory, for the big score, however that is defined. Peddlers of addiction want you to follow them, not the Good Shepherd.

But if we hear the voice of Jesus, if we enter life through him and follow him, then he is our Good Shepherd, even if there are moments when we can't see it. When a family member goes to Burma or Iraq or China, we should recall: The Lord is her shepherd, the Lord is his shepherd.

Closer to home, a child reaches sixteen and can drive. She can disappear into the dark night with sketchy directions and sketchy plans. Parents know, as Will Rogers said, "Good judgment comes from experience and a lot of that comes from [experience gained by] bad judgment." A cell phone and GPS helps, but it is a comfort to know: the Lord is our shepherd.

The Lord is our shepherd in times of need, but also in times of abundance when opportunities abound. He shepherds us as individuals, as families and as a church. Whatever our position in life, the Lord is our good shepherd.

When Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd" we think of tender care and guidance and rightly so. But there is more to it than that. The good shepherd is a mighty caretaker, both strong and tender. This is already clear in the Old Testament.

I. The Good Shepherds of Israel

From the beginning, God taught his people that he is "the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel" (Genesis 49:24). Jacob confesses that God "has been my shepherd all my life" (Genesis 48:15). He asks the Lord to shepherd his family after he dies. As shepherd, God promised to lead his people where they should go, "to go out and come in before them," to "lead them out and bring them in" so they "will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Numbers 27:17).

The Lord is Israel's shepherd, but he appoints under-shepherds (Ezekiel 34). In the Old Testament, prophets and kings were supposed to shepherd Israel. When Israel's leaders came to crown David, they understood this.

They told David that even when Saul was king, "you were the one who led Israel on her military campaigns. And the Lord said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel'" (2 Samuel 5:2). David was a strong shepherd - a warrior king (1 Samuel 16:18). He killed wild beasts with his hands (1 Samuel 17:37). He defeated the armies that invaded Israel.

By contrast, evil kings led the people into foolish practices and pointless wars. Before one such battle, the prophet Micaiah predicted disaster, "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd" (1 Kings. 22:17, 2 Chronicles. 18:16).

A strong shepherd

The link to military strength teaches that a good shepherd is tender, but also powerful, to protect Israel from her enemies. Isaiah said, "See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for Him... He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" (Isaiah 40:10-11, 63:11-12).

We love Psalm 23 because it says, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want." That is, he will feed and clothe us, physically or spiritually. But the Shepherd is also strong. He has a rod to strike our enemies. Thus we fear no evil; we can dine in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23:1-5).

When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" he declares that he's the mighty caretaker of his people. He has both the might and compassion of a shepherd.

In times of weakness, remember that the Lord is a strong shepherd. In times of uncertainty, expect him to lead, to show us his way. But let's look more closely at the name "Good Shepherd."

2. The Good Shepherd's names

Abraham, David and others functioned as good shepherds when they led Israel faithfully. But when Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd" he says it's more than his function, it is his very nature, for "I am" is a name of God.

In Exodus 3:6 the Lord says, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob." Soon he makes the absolute statement "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:13-14). He adds, "I am the one who blots out your sins" (Isaiah 43:25, 51:12). "I am the one who comforts you" (Isaiah 51:12).

So when Jesus says, "I am," he speaks as God speaks and claims to be God. He says, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58, 18:6). He says, "I am" bread, water, light, a door, the way, and "the good shepherd."

With each "I am" saying, Jesus directs longings and needs to himself.

The law gives light (Psalm 119:105), but Jesus is the Light.

The law shows the way we should walk (Deuteronomy 5:32-33), but Jesus is the Way.

Jesus says it is his nature to satisfy our proper longings – our longing for light, guidance and protection. Therefore, we should train ourselves to turn to Jesus to satisfy our longings. If Jesus doesn't satisfy a desire –directly or indirectly - we should at least ask if it's a good desire.

We tend to seek fulfillment in temporal things. By God's providence, food, laughter, friends, respect, even sleep do satisfy us. We rightly take pleasure in these things. But they never finally satisfy. If we give ourselves to them as our ultimate source of happiness, they fail us. If anyone seeks ultimate fulfillment in the Cardinals, remember: Only one team wins the World Series each year.

We all find too much significance in created things. When I was a boy, baseball was my summertime god. I longed to be an all star. When I finally made it I was glad, but disappointed too. I thought, "This is it?" Today's temptations can come from our profession: reputation and achievement, or in possessions or relationships. They can come if I get things right with my friend, spouse, or my child... It can be intangible, like respect. You may long to be desired. You may long for a project or for romance. Name the dream.

But these things can't satisfy our deep desires. When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," he teaches us to take our hopes to him.

It is a challenge, in groups like ours, to know that the Lord is our shepherd. Why? Because we shepherd ourselves. Many of us are talented, well-educated and well-trained. We either have high skills or are building our skills. We know what we want and have the self-discipline, social skills and connections to get there. As a result, we dream that we can shepherd ourselves, that we can take care of ourselves, that we do not need Christ. (Jude 12).

Augustine said, "Whoever seeks to be more than he is becomes less." If we aspire to be self-sufficient, we withdraw from Christ, who is truly sufficient.

The Bible calls Jesus "the chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:3). That makes pastors and other church leaders "under-shepherds." Fathers and mothers shepherd their families. Godly business leaders should aim to shepherd their workers.

If you are under the care of others, I say two things. First, give thanks for your leaders and yield to them as much as you can. But don't put your final confidence in any humanity. The Lord is our shepherd.

3. The Good Shepherd's Kindness

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" in John 10, but the story begins in John 9, when Jesus healed a blind man. Because Jesus restored the man's sight on a Sabbath day, the leaders were angry at Jesus and tried to get the healed man to incriminate him. When he wouldn't, they insulted him and threw him out of the synagogue. They were angry, abusive shepherds (9:28-34). Jesus found the man and led him to faith (9:35-38). He gave the man sight and said, "I am the light of the world." Now he adds that he cares: "I am the Good Shepherd."

Jesus on bad shepherds

Because Israel's shepherds were harsh and loveless, Jesus declared it a teaching moment on bad shepherd. He mentioned two types.

First type is thieves and robbers (10:1, 8). They care nothing for the flock. They don't know the sheep and the sheep refuse to follow. They plunder and destroy the flock (Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23). There is nothing more dangerous to God's people than wicked religious leaders. False religious leaders are still the first kind of bad shepherd. People follow bad advice. They believe false doctrine, especially when presented with conviction and emotional stories.

Doctrinal sloppiness enables it. Sadly, some churches buy into it. I've seen church ads that sound as if the coffee bar is a leading attraction. Suppose that works; how can the leaders then effectively warn about the dangers of materialism and consumerism? We need deeper interests - books over java. You can get coffee anywhere, but where can we get God's truth? And the more unpalatable and unpopular the truth is, the more a faithful shepherd will say it.

But there are false shepherds everywhere. People trust leaders. They believe promises – "We will stand by you... We have big plans for you... We'll give you every opportunity to grow." The leader may not mean it. She may be a people pleaser with no ability to make it so. It's bad shepherding.

Second, Jesus also mentions the hired hand. The hired hand is not wicked, he's uncommitted. He cares, but his interest in the flock is thinned out by his greater interest in himself. He says he cares, but when trouble comes, he cares for himself first. When wolves come, hired hands abandon the flock.

The hired hand performs his duties when all is quiet and the pay rolls in. But in the test, when standing for the flock would cost something, the hired hand flees. His first commitment is to himself, not the flock. In the test, second rate interest in the flock can't be distinguished from no interest at all. But a good shepherd stands up to the wolves when it might cost him.

In May 1996, a blinding snowstorm climbed the sides of Mt. Everest on a day when about twenty people attempted to reach the summit. The guides revealed what kinds of shepherds they were. In temperatures far below zero, in blinding snow, with oxygen canisters running out, one headed for the safety of another camp. Others stayed out, striving to save every life, even at the risk and ultimately the cost of their own life.¹

There are lots hired hands in the world. I was once with a group of leaders when someone said, "Sometimes I think about quitting every day." The room got quiet. A wise counselor type then said, "That's not unusual. Most leaders do, at some point." The room got quiet again.

The question is not "Do you ever think about quitting?" Of course we do. The question is: "What next?" Do you then quit or do you follow the Good Shepherd and persevere, even as you let him shepherd you?

Leaders: think, pray, seek mentors, listen to stories of faithful leaders, so you will be ready to stand firm when wolves come. Still, we should remember that every shepherd will fail, however good he or she may be. Jesus is the one best shepherd, the beautiful shepherd.

4. The Good Shepherd's work

The beautiful shepherd

Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11). John 10 explains what that means. First, John uses the Greek term *kavlo*. *kavlo* is not the term for moral goodness, but for aesthetic goodness. It means Jesus is the noble, beautiful, even refined shepherd. The words kaleidoscope and calligraphy come from that Greek word.

William Temple said, "Our vocation is so to practice virtue that men are won to it; it is possible to be morally upright repulsively." Jesus knew it's important to be morally upright in a winsome, attractive way. Jesus is the beautiful shepherd. He doesn't just give laws. He leads beautifully.

Jesus directs his sheep – John 10:9-10

Sheep are wanderers; they need a guide. When Jesus says his sheep "will go in and come out" (10:9), he means he will lead us through life. We will have direction, we will know where to go as we seek and follow him.

It's a pitiful thing to lack a leader. When Jesus saw Israel's crowds "he had compassion on them, because they were helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). Jesus leads his people where they need to go. He gets us there. This is a powerful principle in life's uncertain moments:

- Looking for a job. Considering an uncertain financial future.

¹ Krakauer, *Into Thin Air*

- Meditating on the course of an illness. Choosing a medical procedure.
- Making a big decision – to continue a relationship with someone or not.

But Jesus' work as Shepherd is broader than that; it's as broad as life. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is, at least in part, a search for meaning. But in section 32, he seems to give that up:

I think I could turn and live with animals, so placid and self-contained...
 They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
 They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
 They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
 Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things...
 Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

He says: "I'd like the blissful sleep of a dog, a cow, a hawk (not a dung beetle), with no troubling thoughts of guilt, duty, and eternity." Perhaps you have felt that way. Our self-awareness and aspiration become a burden. I feel it at times. I don't want to become a cow, but I sometimes long for the simple life, the honest labor of unloading trucks the simplicity of it. And the boxes don't talk back, don't offer suggestions for a better way to do things. But the Lord, the Good Shepherd won't let us drift off.

The Lord shepherds us in more mundane ways, too: A young couple at Central learned that their car's engine was about to die. The car was not worth the repair. They were trying to save for a down payment on a house. What to do? Give thanks for "Cash for clunkers." Then do your research. Then pray for guidance. They decided to go for a certain car. They tested, bargained, and they bought – only to find that while they were buying the car at dealer #1, someone else just bought it at dealer #2. Yet somehow it all worked out. The Lord is our shepherd.

The Lord leads where we never would have thought to go. When we arrive, we recognize it as the right place. Walking where he leads, we flourish (10:10).

Jesus knows and delights in his sheep - John 10:14-15

Jesus says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." Because Jesus is Lord, he knows us perfectly. This thought could be frightening! He knows everything about us, even our darkest thoughts! But he still loves us - enough to die for us, enough to lead us to fullness of life. His knowledge is sweet and intimate. We know his voice, he knows our name and he leads us (10:3-4).

God knows all things, but He has a special knowledge and love of His sheep. His knowledge of us is perfect and complete and He says we can know him, too.

If God knows our flaws fully yet loves us perfectly, we have assurance of His unfailing commitment to us. Since God knows the worst and still loves us, we should cast aside fear of rejection and rest in Him like a child in a mother's arms.

This liberates our prayer. God already knows our sins, so we can confess them openly, plead confidently for forgiveness and for release from their power.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:9, 17-18)

Jesus is the door, the gate at the entrance to the sheepfold (10:7, 9). When he says, "Whoever enters through me will be saved" (10:9), the metaphor points beyond physical preservation to his spiritual care for his flock in this life.

He also says, "Whoever enters through me will be saved." That means he will grant them eternal life, through faith in him. Jesus promises eternal life - life after death. And eternal life begins now, for all who trust him.

Jesus says "I lay down my life" for the sheep (10:17). Here the metaphor transcends reality. In reality, sheep exist for the shepherd's benefit. To protect his livelihood, a shepherd might risk his life for his sheep. David risked his life when he killed a lion and a bear that attacked his sheep. But shepherds never plan to die for the sheep. If they die, shepherds gain nothing and the flock is ruined.

No metaphor can fully describe Jesus. His death is not the accidental result of facing wild beasts and losing. Three times he says he chose to lay down his life for his sheep (10:11, 17-18). He offered his life as a sacrifice for his sheep.

This is the atonement. Jesus' flock is in mortal danger, not from beasts but from the sin that makes us liable to eternal death. Our Shepherd sacrificed his life in order to save the sheep from physical and eternal death.

Death is never the final word, because after he lays down his life, he will take it up again and shepherd the flock again (10:17-18). By dying for the sheep, Jesus becomes the supremely good Shepherd. He provides what his sheep need, no matter the cost. Jesus died in history so that his people might live forever, by believing in him. That is the foundation for the Christian life.

We believe this as a matter of doctrine. The real question: Do you believe it personally? Do you know Jesus as your shepherd, your way to eternal life? If not, and you've been thinking about it for a long time, if you feel God's Spirit nudging you, why not come under his care today?

Communion Sunday is a great time to solidify a soft commitment or to tell the Lord, "Yes I believe" for the first time. To take communion is to take the gospel onto your lips – the body of Christ broken for you. To take communion is to say, "I believe" with your hands and mind. By taking the elements, you say, "I am a sinner, bound for death. Jesus died in my place, that I might live. I believe in him."

If you aren't sure what you think or believe – or if you have a friend, take one of the opportunities here. Tell me, call me, email or text me or another pastor. Call the church. Put a note in offering. We can talk and explore together.

These are the traits of the good shepherd. Jesus defends his sheep, directs his sheep. Jesus delights in his sheep. Jesus dies for his sheep and then he lives for them – for us. Therefore, let him lead you this year. Follow him where he goes, wherever he takes you knowing it's the place you need to be. It's the place where you will live.