



“I Am the Good Shepherd”

March 27, 2022

John 10:1-16

Rev. Amanda Moseng, Pastor of Discipleship

2537 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136
Telephone: 216-321-8880
Website: www.COTSumc.org

As Christians, one of the common descriptors given to us is “sheep”. But I think a lot of us bristle against this from time to time. We don’t like being referred to as sheep! It can feel insulting at times! It calls to mind the term “sheeple,” a word thrown around to describe those who blindly follow someone and never question what they do or say. That is not what we are going for here. But when Jesus says “I Am the Good Shepherd,” that implies that there must be sheep. Guess what that makes us? Baa! Our status as sheep is true and one of many ways to understand ourselves as Christians, but it has less to do with how many similar characteristics we have with sheep. We diverge greatly in comparison. It has more to do with the care, guidance, and direction we all benefit from. So what if we focused more on the necessary antecedent, the shepherd? Not just any shepherd, but Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaimed, “I Am the Good Shepherd.”

I would venture to say that most of us have not spent an extended amount of time around sheep. My exposure has been limited mainly to petting zoos. Only, petting zoos, actually. Some of you may have seen flocks of sheep when travelling, particularly to Ireland and the United Kingdom. So perhaps the imagery and description that Jesus provides in this passage feel unfamiliar. As we journey through this passage, we will explore the context and gain a sense of what Jesus was talking about here.

You might remember that in the first sermon in this series I mentioned that there are seven “I Am” statements in the Gospel of John, but that we would only look at 6 of them. I mentioned that “I Am the Gate” was being passed over. Well, it turns out that I was wrong! You are getting a bonus “I Am” statement today! And I think it actually provides a lot of clarity about who Jesus is and it supports our understanding of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Interestingly enough, the original Greek word used when Jesus says “I Am the Gate”, θύρα (thoo-ras), primarily means “door” but can also mean “gate.” Bible translations differ on which word they use, so we will explore both meanings. Because truthfully, I have different mental pictures for a gate and a door. They serve similar purposes but are different. Context makes a difference. I do not look at my front door and think, “what a delightful yellow gate!” (The front door on the parsonage is bright yellow). I do not look at our driveway gate and say to my husband, “I need to tell Tarah that the bottom of our door broke when it slammed against the side of the concrete ledge.” (Which it did). When we get into the historical context, those differences will be clearer.

Let’s start then with Jesus as the Gate. Some translations and commentators mark this passage as a continuation of the previous narrative, which included a conflict over Jesus healing a blind man. This would suggest that Jesus is referring to the Pharisees when he uses the terms “thieves and outlaws.” Others keep it as a discrete unit that does not connect to the preceding narrative. I find it more compelling to understand it as a discrete unit and we will touch on “thieves and outlaws” in just a bit.

Jesus says in v.1-3, “I assure you that whoever doesn’t enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens that gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” There were two kinds of sheep folds in ancient Palestine and these three verses describe a sheep fold that would have been found in the city. This type of sheep fold would have been attached to the side of a building and shepherds passing through the city could rent the sheep fold to keep their sheep safe at night. These were communal sheep folds, so there could have been more than one flock at a time. There was a guard who stood watch at the gate and who had the key to the gate. The guard would open the gate for the shepherd, who would call to their sheep to lead them out of the fold. When Jesus mentions thieves and robbers here, these are people who clearly do not have keys to the gate. They are not interested in the well-being of the sheep but want to steal the sheep for personal gain.

Jesus continues by saying “I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will

come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.” As I previously mentioned, there is more than one way to understand “thieves and outlaws.” A logical deduction could be the Pharisees, given the previous narrative, but I side with the commentators who suggest this refers to insurrectionists and revolutionaries. The Greek word here for outlaw, or robber, *lestes* (ληστής), is used in other instances in the gospels to refer to guerilla warriors and revolutionaries such as Barabbas, who was involved in an insurrection. Jesus is referring to the false messiahs who promised the hope of a new age, one brought on by violence and bloodshed. They were not there to bring life but to bring about destruction. Jesus contrasts himself to these thieves and outlaws, declaring that Jesus came so that we could have life, abundant and full life. Much like the guard who opens the gate for the shepherd, Jesus opens the gate so that we can fully know God.

Let’s take a look at the alternate translation: Jesus as the door. This provides a slightly different connotation. I already mentioned the first kind of sheep fold, which was typically found in the city. But sheep folds could also be found out in the countryside. These were typically enclosures found within caves or rock formations. One of the downsides to these sheep folds, however, was the lack of a door. A door was necessary to keep the sheep safe from wild animals, such as a wolf. How did the shepherd keep the sheep safe? By laying in the doorway, effectively functioning as a door. The shepherd would be the first line of defense for the sheep in the event of attack. This understanding brings another level of meaning when Jesus says that “the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

With that, we have arrived at the focal self-revelation of Jesus: “I Am the Good Shepherd.” Jesus’ original audience would have resonated with this description because shepherding imagery exists all throughout the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. Many of the well-known leaders in the Old Testament, such as Moses and David, were shepherds. God is referred to as a shepherd in various instances: “But his bow stayed strong, and his forearms were nimble, by the hands of the strong one of Jacob, by the name of the shepherd, the rock of Israel” (Gen 49:24, in the passage revealing the destiny of the twelve tribes, specifically Joseph here). Psalm 23 is a classic example, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” And from Psalm 78:52, a psalm recounting God’s faithfulness in the wilderness, “God led his own people out like sheep, guiding them like a flock in the wilderness.” There are several examples in the psalms. We also have passages like this one from Isaiah 40:11, “Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock; he will gather lambs in his arms and lift them onto his lap.” This one is starting to hit closer to our passage from today. Which finally brings us to Ezekiel 34:11-16: “For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” Jesus identifies himself with this image of God as the shepherd and is the fulfillment of this model shepherd. Jesus is talking about sheep, but he is not really talking about sheep, isn’t he? The sheep are allegorical in nature. Jesus is talking about us.

What does all of this tell us about Jesus? First, it tells us that Jesus is relational. Jesus is not interested in a surface encounter but a close, intimate relationship. We know this because Jesus said, “the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... I know my own sheep and they know me.” Jesus knows our name. Jesus knows our story. Jesus knows the hurt, the pain, and the suffering we encounter. Jesus calls us by our name, inviting us to himself. Second, we learn that Jesus cares about us. He makes the comparison between the hired hand and the shepherd. The hired hand flees when trouble comes but the shepherd stays. Jesus does not leave us when troubles and crises arise. We matter to Jesus. Third, we can glean from Jesus being the gate/door that Jesus protects us. He defends us. He provides structure and stability. He leads us and guides us. He grants us freedom and the fullness of life. Finally, we learn that Jesus was willing to give his own life so that we might live. Jesus said, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I give up my life for the sheep.” Jesus loves us so dearly, so fiercely, so strongly, that he would give up his own life, much like a sacrificial lamb. In Jesus we have the forgiveness of sin and new life.

A question remains for us. Do we recognize the voice of Jesus calling to us? Jesus says “Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger but will run away because they don’t know the stranger’s voice.” There are a lot of voices speaking to us. Which one will we listen to? And how do you know it is the voice of Jesus? A good rule of thumb is to check if what you are hearing lines up with scripture. God will never lead you in a way that is contrary to God’s word. Check with trusted, mature, spiritual friends. Do they see any red flags with what you are hearing? Does it seem consistent with previous experience? Devote yourself to prayer. Spend time listening for God’s voice, asking that the voice of Jesus would speak louder than all the rest. Finally, take the temperature of what you are hearing. How does it make you feel? Is there a sense of peace surrounding the voice? This is by no means exhaustive but a good guide for discerning the voice of God. In my experience, if it is from God, it will not go away. God is persistent in getting our attention and bringing us to a place where we will listen. Pay attention to the voice of Jesus leading you and guiding you.

The “I Am” statements in John 10 deepen our understanding of Jesus. The images of Jesus as the gate, the door, and the Good Shepherd are intensely relational because they have no meaning without the presence of sheep. “These ‘I am’ statements do not simply reveal who Jesus is, but more specifically reveal who Jesus is in relationship to those who follow him... the identity of the community is determined by the shepherd’s relationship to it and its relationship to the shepherd.”¹ This tells us that our identity is shaped by Jesus’ identity. The “I Am” statements of Jesus are truly powerful because not only do they tell us about Jesus, they tell us about ourselves. The more we seek to know God, the more we know and learn about ourselves. Thankfully, the God we love and serve is a God who desires to be known and has been made known to us in Jesus. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, revealing to us God’s care, guidance, protection, and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ O’Day, Gail R. *The Gospel of John*. The New Interpreter’s Bible. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 672.