

I AM: The Good Shepherd

John 10:11-18, 27-30 (NIV)

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father... ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

Two weeks ago we talked about sheep because Jesus said, "I AM: The Gate." He is the only way that any of us belong to God, to his flock, and thus have a full and eternal life with him. At the same time, we learned that domesticated sheep are pretty helpless. They need to be led to water that is safe for them to drink from so as to not fall in and drown (because they can't swim). They have to be led to individual patches of grass to eat - especially in the Middle East since there are not huge fields of alfalfa for the sheep to lazily feast on. If they are not sheered, they will have disease ridden coats of wool. And when an enemy attacks, domesticated sheep will clump together, making it easy for the predator to target them and kill off as many as they want. Sheep need a shepherd: to lead them to green pastures and quiet waters, to protect them from enemies and wild animals of every kind. Without a shepherd, they will not survive.

In Jesus' teaching here in John chapter 10, the one flock of sheep represent his believers, his Church. Jesus is comparing us to sheep. And what are sheep supposed to do? Jesus says, "The sheep listen to [the shepherd's] voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." (John 10:2-4)

Do you listen to the Shepherd's voice? Do you listen to Jesus and follow him? Or do you prefer listen to and follow your own voice?

with prerecording our worship services, hosting Bible studies online, and doing a livestream "fireside chat," I am much more conscientious of my own voice now as I listen to it more often. There are moments when I almost lose all train of thought while preaching to you as I think, "Why on earth are you listening to my voice? My voice is not sensational like that of David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, or Bruno Mars. I don't have the kind of voice that soothes you no matter what comes out of it like a Morgan Freeman. Do I have anything worth saying? I'm just a 30-something year old guy from Wisconsin. Why on earth are you listening to me?"

In looking to answer that semi-rhetorical question, the temptation is to assume that you really enjoy hearing me talk, to think that people come to this church to listen to my voice, that people are watching on Youtube and Facebook to hear me talk. Me! I get views and new subscribers and likes. I must be pretty great for these people to want to listen to me. I must have the best answers. People should do what I say. Those assumptions put me in danger of falling in love with the sound of my own voice.

This temptation is certainly not exclusive to preachers. We all like the sound of our own voices. Maybe we don't actually like the tone of them, but we like it when people listen to what we have to say. We like it when people agree with an opinion that we express. The more this happens, the more we get into our own little worlds and makes ourselves king. I have the best ideas, the right ideas. Anyone who disagrees with me is stupid. I know better.

When we fall in love with our own voices, we make ourselves God. We know that we've fallen for our own voices when there's a teaching from God's Word, from the Good Shepherd, that we disagree with. We say, "God wouldn't do that" or "God would want this for me" as if we know the mind of God and the entirety of his will. And when we have assumed the place of God, loving our own voice instead of his, then what do we need Jesus for? I don't need someone to save me. I can accomplish that. I know the right answers and correct choices anyway. I don't need to listen to anyone's voice but mine.

But you and I, we are sheep. Sheep are not known at all for leadership ability or good, practical decision-making skills or even survival skills. Sheep cannot save themselves. Domesticated sheep will die if left to listen to themselves for life. And so we too will die if we fall in love with our opinions, our ideas, our voices, the voices of sheep.

Our only hope is to listen to the voice of the Shepherd. Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (verse 11) Jesus, the Good Shepherd, tells us that he puts his life on the line to protect the sheep, to give them life – even better, life eternal. The hired hand just wants the paycheck; he’s not going to die for the sheep, let alone give them eternal life. The Good Shepherd, though, gives us his life for the sheep so that his sheep live with him and are taken care of forever.

This, of course, plays out in Jesus’ life. We have heard of the Good Shepherd’s pain and suffering and death on Good Friday. Christ suffered for you. As we heard in our Second Bible reading: “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Peter 2:24-25) We all, like sheep, went astray, listening to our own voices, falling in love with our ideas of God and spirituality, telling ourselves that we know best. Jesus as the Good Shepherd laid down his life for our sins - those sins of arrogance, of self-reliance. By laying down his life for the sheep, for us, Jesus healed us from all our self-inflicted wounds of sin as we listened to our own voice instead of God’s.

What’s more is that the Good Shepherd does what no sheep could ever do and what no other shepherd could ever do. Listen to the Good Shepherd’s voice as he says, “...I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again...” (verses 17,18) We could certainly talk big about making an ultimate sacrifice or overcoming death, but if you or I were ever make that ultimate sacrifice and die for another person or some other noble cause, we are simply dead and not coming back. The Good Shepherd, though, lays down his life, bearing our sins on the cross in order to heal us by his wounds. But then he takes it right back up. No one took his life from him. He did not have all our sins pinned on him by random chance or gross injustice. No, he actively took them on and then actively laid down his life on the cross, only to take his life back up again. Death did not overtake him. This was his will, his choice: to lay down his life for us and so heal us by his wounds. He gave himself into death, and then brought himself back from death to life. He did what only God could do because only the great “I AM,” God from all eternity, has complete power over death because he is also life. As Jesus said, “I AM the Good Shepherd.” (verse 11)

In the same way that only the great “I AM” could lay down his life for the flock and then take it right back up, so also only he can keep us as a part of his flock. It’s never been by our efforts that we are one of God’s sheep. We have never belonged to God by following our own voices. If we listen to our own voices, we will die. The wolf will come and devour us, and we will not come back from it. Jesus, the great “I AM” says, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.” (verses 27-28) You are in the hands of the great “I AM,” the Good Shepherd. No one can snatch you away from him: not plague, not wolves, not death, not hired hands, not thieves nor robbers, not even the devil himself. Why? Because he is the one and only great “I AM.” Jesus said, “My Father, who has given [the sheep] to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (verses 29-30) No one can snatch you away from the Good Shepherd because God is who he is – this unique, all-powerful Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of the world. There is no one else.

Our Good Shepherd is the only one who can choose to lay down his life only to take it up again. He is the only one whose voice brings us into his flock, his Church. So we stop listening to and falling in love with our voices, and instead listen and rely wholly on his. When I preach, I ask that God use his Words, not mine. When we share the Good Shepherd with others, we do so by using his voice, his accomplishments, his power, his authority, not ours. By the Good Shepherd’s voice, we are all called and gathered to one flock, never to be lost. Why? Because Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He is the great “I AM.” There is no one stronger. There is no one else who can lay down his life of his own accord only to take it up again. Amen.