

The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life for the Sheep

John 10:11-18 (NIV84)

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns 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."

Have you ever seen shepherds in action or done some shepherding yourself? The closest that I have come was to watch a short video of shepherds doing their thing out in the Middle East. It was interesting. The sheep really have to trust their shepherd. Food is very scarce. The Middle East doesn't have fields of alfalfa. The shepherd has to hunt for those morsels of green grass growing from crevices in the rocky, desert-like soil. The shepherd leads them by going out in front of them, calling them to their food and water with his voice, often in song. There are no cattle prods. He doesn't walk behind them. He leads the way and calls his sheep to follow him.

Even though few of us, if any, have ever seen a shepherd in real life, we find an immense amount of comfort in this biblical picture of the Lord being our shepherd. We love Psalm 23, one of the most universally comforting psalms of all time. The Shepherd picture is given to us again here in John chapter 10.

Leading up to our verses today, Jesus has already established that sheep know their shepherd's voice and will only follow him, not the voice of a stranger or thief. Speaking of thieves, Jesus makes it clear that he will protect his sheep from any potential thieves. He says of himself, "I am the gate for the sheep." (verse 7) He keeps the sheep safe. Going through him as the gate, sheep will come in and go out and find pasture. By being the gate, Jesus has "come that [the sheep] may have life, and have it to the full." (verse 10)

If there were any confusion as to who the identity of the Shepherd was, Jesus clarifies: "I am the good Shepherd." (verse 11) He is the one leading those sheep to their food and water, leading the way, walking out front, calling to his sheep exactly where they need to go. Again, no cattle prods. No border collies to bark and snap to lead the sheep. The Good Shepherd is gentle with his sheep.

As the good Shepherd walks out front, he also is making sure that the sheep can travel the terrain with ease. If a sheep falls over and ends up on its back, it can't roll over. He's stuck unless his shepherd gets him back on his feet. Same if a sheep falls into a ditch or a pit. He's not going to get itself out. The shepherd reaches down with his crook and pulls him out.

Aside from the disadvantage of not being able to roll over, sheep also don't have natural defenses. They don't have any fangs. They don't have sharp claws. They can't even bark. If a wolf comes along to attack a sheep, the sheep's only option is to run away and hope it doesn't get caught. They are helpless when danger comes.

In Jesus' extended metaphor, you probably already get that we are the sheep. Even though we don't have all the disadvantages of sheep, there are times when we feel pretty helpless when we are attacked, when wolves come our way. Some of the wolves that we encounter look like good, pious people. They have rules for us, ways to live if we want to be holy and upright like they are. We are attacked as they pile law after law, rule after rule upon us. They burden our consciences, blaming us for not living up to what we need to do to be holy like them. Their words sound good, like things that God would expect of us, but the burden is too much. I'm overwhelmed. I try and try and try, but it's never enough. I can't get it done. I can't be holy like them. I'm trapped by all these laws, unable to earn my way into God's good graces.

Then there are wolves who attack us with their words. Immediately following our verses today, John records part of the crowds' reaction: "At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, 'He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?'" (verses 19-20) They thought Jesus was raving mad to compare us to sheep, for him to protect us and give us life and be the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

Just last Sunday, I met a parent in the park as our kids were playing on the playset. The conversation quickly, naturally came to, "What do you do?" I told him that I was the pastor here at Light of the Valley. In response, he told me that he belongs to what is called Pastafarianism. Simple explanation of what that is is that it takes the Christian argument that just because you can't see God doesn't mean he doesn't exist and ridicules it by saying that they believe the flying spaghetti monster exists even if you don't see it.

This was not someone saying that they were atheist or that they had no use for God in their lives. This was someone who equated belief in God the same as believing in the existence of a flying spaghetti monster. The more we talked the more I figured out that he had had many Christians witness to him throughout his life. And now here I am with him. I had just met the man. I was personally offended and mocked and attacked by his "beliefs." Do I tell him that his belief is going to get him an eternity in hell? Would that resonate with him? Would that get him to reconsider his Pastafarianism? Should I start a logical line of questioning about absolute truths that exist even though we can't see or scientifically prove them? Honestly, I had no idea what to say. I felt defenseless. The only option seemed to be "run." I felt like a sheep.

I'm sure that you have your own stories of those who mocked your faith, made you feel as if you were completely defenseless. As much as we like to think that we can take care of ourselves, we can fight off any attack, there are times when we realize that we are sheep. When we are attacked, we are helpless. Wolves come into our lives as false teachers burdening our consciences that we need to look holier or who mock our beliefs and make us feel as if believing in God is completely ridiculous. They are trying to devour us, kill our faith, scatter us from the rest of the flock and away from our Good Shepherd.

Knowing that the sheep are defenseless, the Good Shepherd steps in, and he lays down his life for the sheep. He doesn't run away from the wolf. He doesn't try to save his own life. He stands between us sheep and the wolf, those who want to attack and try to destroy our Christian faith. If it were a hired hand for a shepherd, he would run away. He cares nothing for the sheep. He only wants a paycheck, but not our Good Shepherd. He lays down his life for the sheep. He dies protecting the flock.

This is not just some noble sacrifice, that the hero dies at the end of the story and the wolf, once it's finished picking through the carcass of the Good Shepherd, has free reign to attack the sheep. No, the Good Shepherd does not die to leave his sheep vulnerable. "...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)

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, did not leave his disciples without a shepherd when he died on that Friday so many years ago. Yes, the persecution was real. The flock - Jesus' followers - was frightened. They felt helpless against their enemies after the Good Shepherd laid down his life. But he took it up again. He rose from the dead. He showed them that he had come back from the dead. He stuck with his sheep. He continued to lead them, continued to teach them, defend them against those who said they were raving mad to believe that Jesus had rose from the dead. Jesus guaranteed them that he would be with them always, shepherd them from this life to their eternal life in heaven. The Good Shepherd lives and does not run away from taking care of us.

Just as he did with the disciples who watched him die, Jesus does not leave us helpless and undefended like sheep. He continues in his promise to be with us to the very end of the age. He continues to shepherd us.

The Good Shepherd's voice calls to us today. We hear it with words we love so much from places like Psalm 23 and verses as we have here in John chapter 10. His voice sings promises to us, guiding us to trust in him, that he will care for us, protect us, watch over us, defend us from all harm and danger. His voice protects us from the wolves that come after us, drowning out all those who try to burden our consciences and make us feel that we have to earn our way to be in God's flock by obeying commandments. Instead, the Good Shepherd shows us those nail marks and reminds us that the sacrifice is finished and we are forgiven because he laid down his life for the sheep. His voice drowns out the attacks of those who think we are raving mad to believe that there is this unseeable, almighty God in heaven. Instead, his voice proclaims to us that our Good Shepherd took his life back up to save us from an eternity of suffering and pain and torment in hell. As we feel helpless to defend our faith, his voice reassures us that he is the way, the truth, and the life, that he really is here with us and will see us through to the end.

That's the confidence I had in that conversation with the parent who likened my belief to God to belief in a flying spaghetti monster. I felt helpless and attacked, but I knew that my Good Shepherd was with me. My belief would not be shaken by someone looking at me as if I were a fool to believe in God. He would strengthen my faith through this attack, not cause it to be devoured.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, not only to sacrifice himself to save us from the wolf, but he also takes it back up again so that he continues to be our Good Shepherd, leading us in the one flock of the church. When you feel helpless and threatened by the wolves of this world, you have the Good Shepherd's voice calling to you with his Word. He lays down his life to protect you from these enemies only to take his life back up again. Our Good Shepherd is our Risen Lord Jesus, who defends us against every wolf and leads us to be a part of that one flock, the one Christian church and live forever with him in heaven. Amen.

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