

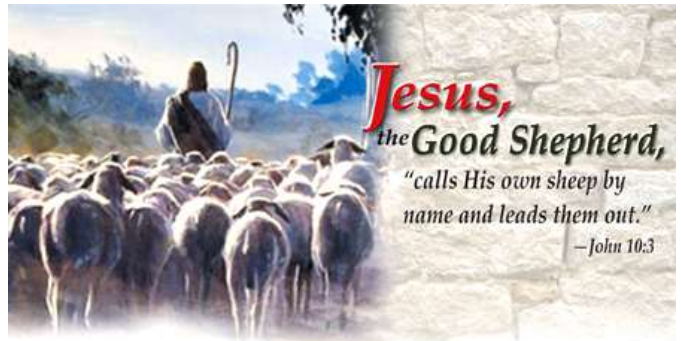
Sunday 3rd May 2020

The Good Shepherd

John 10: 1-5

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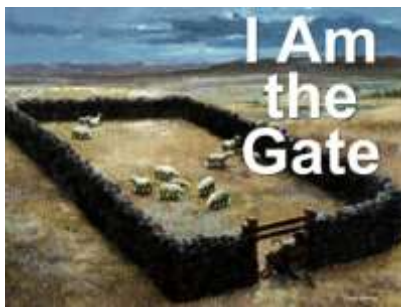
In one of those sermons that bring the biblical world "down to earth," the preacher talked about his life in Africa. He told us how the people of a village knew each other's sheep the way we might know one another's children. As he sat in a group in the village, a person would stop by, "Have you seen my sheep so-and-so?" identifying his own sheep by name. Through the dark night he heard villagers calling out names. "They are calling their sheep," one of the locals told him. "They will all find each other."



This feature of village life in a place small enough and close enough where folks know which sheep are theirs and which belong to someone else, where sheep themselves know to whom they belong, was as familiar to Jesus as it is unfamiliar to us. In this portion of John 10, as Jesus tries to describe the connection between himself and his followers, he uses images that don't touch our hearts and minds as richly as they would have touched his original hearers. There is good work for the preacher in that gap.

This passage is divided into two parts, each addressed to an audience loosely identified as "the Jews" back in John 8:57. His disciples are singled out in 9:2 and the Pharisees are mentioned as "near him" in 9:41. We see in 10:19 that "the Jews" were divided by the things that Jesus was saying. It is fair to imagine the audience for 10:1-10 as including local people of all sorts of persuasions about Jesus and about their faith.

After all the questions about Jesus' identity in John 9, Jesus tries to explain both the division that surrounds him (9:16 and 10:19) and the consummate difference between what he brings to his own and what is brought by others. There is genuine consternation among the people around Jesus. Who is he? How can we trust him? Is he really from God or simply some new charlatan in town? Jesus answers these questions both pragmatically and poetically. He does things that God alone or one blessed by God can do. He describes the blessing he brings from God in poetic terms. This description is what John 10:1-10 offers.



The two parts of the passage occur because no one seems to understand Jesus' first "figure of speech" (verse 6). In verses 1-5 Jesus identifies himself as the **true shepherd**. In verse 6 the narrator explains to us that his hearers did not understand Jesus' figure of speech. Verses 7-10 Jesus offers another way to understand his relationship to the people: **I am the gate for the sheep**. Neither of these images is wholly convincing to everyone, thus bearing out the truth of what Jesus says, that his own sheep hear his voice. Others presumably do not.

Let's look briefly at the two sets of images in this text. In 10:1-5 Jesus simply speaks a truth that his hearers would have known and relied upon. Like the folks in the African village, the first century Judeans also highly valued their sheep and knew them intimately. The first century hearers could have imagined the industrial agriculture that makes Jesus as shepherd an odd image for us.

We can observe a couple of interesting things about the shepherd with whom Jesus identifies himself. First, **this shepherd has the well-being of the sheep at heart, rather than his own well-being**. This shepherd is neither thief nor bandit who would steal sheep, a profoundly anti-social act and one in which the sheep would come to no good end. Jesus emphasizes a particular difference between the bandit and shepherd: the shepherd enters rightly, properly, and openly into the sheepfold. It is appropriate for him to come and call his sheep and he does so, through the door consistently (note the use of present tense participles in verses 1 and 2). All is open and above board, a cooperative effort with an obliging doorkeeper and sheep who respond to the sound of their name. There is a relationship of trust among all parties here. Notice that the sheep are not presented as totally dumb. They hear, follow, flee false shepherds, and are able to "know" whom to trust.

In verse 4, their trust is validated and emphasized by another piece of the shepherd's behaviour: he brings the sheep out of the fold and then goes before them. **The sheep do not simply escape some confinement or hasten out of the fold to brave the larger world on their own. Their shepherd leads them out and then goes before them, in front of them, to lead. The sheep are not abandoned.**

When this image didn't click for people, Jesus tried again to contrast himself with thieving leaders. Becoming very specific about those who had come before him as the thieves and bandits that he had mentioned in verse 1 and whom the sheep rightly fled, Jesus turns to a clear statement of identity. **I am the door. I am the proper way, the right way, the only way into the sheep fold. Pasture, that is life, is through me, the door. Those who enter are being saved, that is, being brought into pasture and life rather than being snatched up for their destruction.**

This passage does not offer us a problem about how Jesus can be both shepherd and gate. Instead, Jesus speaks of the gate to help clarify the image of shepherd.

In both cases it is about the trustworthy one, whether leader or path, who brings his followers into ample pasture. He is the good shepherd of Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, the leader whose work and life are for the sheep and their well-being. He is the right way, the true way to enter into that amplitude, that fullness of life. Both shepherd and gate are participants in a social system whose role is to protect the sheep and provide for them. These are both in contrast with those who prey upon the sheep for their own purposes, diminishing the flock and creating anxiety within it.

That we continue to be divided about who cares best for us, that we continue to live with the anxiety of wondering who seeks to diminish us in any respect ought not surprise us. Division and a struggle to understand are the result and the motivation for Jesus' words here. We struggle for clear speech and we yearn, but hardly ever dare, to trust our leaders.

One lesson here is that sheep fare best together, not picked off one by one. Another is that there is promise of great pasturage, abundant life for all who follow Jesus' way. A third is that there is something public, open, honest, and even simple about how we live as God's people through Jesus. It's the shepherd, the door, the sheepfold rather than the sneaky, hidden bandit or robber. There are some hints in that contrast that might help us identify the true shepherd. And there is the comfort that understanding comes and goes. **Hearing Jesus' voice does not always happen easily even for those who are closest to him. Yet neither he nor they abandon one another.**

In a world where even computers generate letters and phone calls in which we are addressed by name, always seeking to gain something from us, **there is a promise here that when God calls to us through Jesus we dare to trust that we will be fed along with all God's people.**



Christ himself carried our sins in his body to the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness. It is by his wounds that you have been healed. You were like sheep that had lost your way, but now you have been brought back to follow the Shepherd and Keeper of your souls.
1 Peter 2: 24-25