

The Great I Am: The Good Shepherd Sunday, 4/29/18

1 There are many names that have been given to Jesus over the years- Rock, Savior, Messiah, Emmanuel. Today we continue our worship series focusing on seven special names that Jesus gave to himself in the Gospel of John. Each of these names is an invitation for us to grow more in love with the one we call our Lord. Each of the names is prefaced with the simple yet profound statement by Jesus in John 8:58, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Whenever we call Jesus by name, we remember that Jesus is first, simply “I am.” Each name beyond that is just a facet of human understanding applied to an infinite and awesome God. Whenever we call Jesus by name, we’re invited to discover more of Jesus by walking closely with him in a love relationship each day.

2 We’re continuing today with one of the most familiar and cherished names for Jesus: The Good Shepherd. Unlike the name we looked at last week, “The Gate,” I’m guessing there are fewer than a handful of people here today who haven’t heard this name for Jesus. Why is that? There are many reasons. It’s a favorite image for stained glass church windows. We confess it each time we recite the 23rd Psalm, and say, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” It’s a comforting image that we can understand. And, of course, the Scriptures are full of familiar images of shepherds. King David was a shepherd before he was anointed to be King, and before his brave encounter with Goliath, the giant Philistine, David told of rescuing lambs from the jaws of lions and bears.¹ The birth of Jesus was announced to shepherds who were out in the fields with their sheep. And most importantly, Jesus himself owned the title of Shepherd. We’re continuing where we left off last week in the Gospel of John, where Jesus spoke to the crowds, saying “I am the gate for the sheep...Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures.”² I’m picking up now in verse 11 in the New Living Translation.

{Read John 10:11-16 (NLT)}.

3 With all the stained-glass depictions of Jesus holding a lamb, we sometime romanticize an image of a profession that was anything but glamorous. Craig Rogers, a modern-day shepherd who tends his flock in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, sets

¹ 1Samuel 17:34-37

² John 10:7, 9 (NLT 2nd Ed.)

the record straight for us:

From the beginning of time, shepherds have been the proverbial “ditch diggers,” the down-trodden, the disrespected. Hence, even the angels came to the shepherds, the lowliest of all men, to share the news of the birth of Christ...Over the centuries, nothing has changed much. From the shepherds of the hills of Scotland, to the shepherds of the new Western frontier, to the Basque shepherds who migrated from Mexico and became the shepherds of the far west..., all have been discriminated upon and viewed as a lowly class over the ages.

Even today, many wish not to be referred to as “shepherds” but instead as ranchers, land owners, or flock owners. The work of shepherding is left to the “lowly” or “immigrant” shepherds. Shepherds have typically been the transient or migratory workforce since the early days of agriculture. Shepherds have never been romanticized like the western cowboy. In fact, the shepherd has often been cast as the villain, the migratory farmer who was ruining the cattle grazing land of the west...I find great pride in doing the ancient work of caring for sheep, the humble work of caring for the sick, ensuring the health of each individual, providing feed and shelter and protecting the safety and health of the flock. Shepherding requires more hands-on work than most livestock farming. Lambing (the birthing of lambs) often occurs at night, in the cold, and is a solitary farming task where the reward is personal satisfaction in perhaps saving a life of a ewe or bringing a lamb into the world that otherwise would not make it. It is a personal satisfaction with few equals.³

Let's stop for a second and allow ourselves to experience the wonder that the King of Creation came into creation and compared himself to anything other than that, let alone a humble, migrant worker who kept long hours and was shunned by polite society. When we call Jesus the Good Shepherd, that's part of what that name means. Jesus is the one who could have claimed a crown, but choose instead to be a manual laborer, working in the fields for his Father. See how great the love of God is for us, the sheep of God's flock! There are many titles and roles we claim for ourselves over our lifetimes. Jesus sets before us the example of humility over pride, lowliness over loftiness, fruitfulness over idleness, and love of others as an essential expression of God's love for us.

³ <https://modernfarmer.com/2013/12/10-things-learned-lambs/>

4 We know from the 23rd Psalm some of the essential benefits that a good shepherd brings to a flock of sheep. Food and water, green pastures and still waters, are things that sheep, unlike goats, can't manage to find on their own. Just like sheep, we depend on Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to provide us with our daily bread, all the things we need to thrive in the course of our day. Have you ever wondered why the waters of the 23rd Psalm are *still*? Sheep don't like moving water. They can swim, but their wool gets water logged and they're not great swimmers.

What is the daily bread that you depend on from God? Is it a job, a place to live, a loving relationship, clean water, three square meals? It's easy to chew and swallow our way through each day without ever taking the time to recall with thanksgiving the loving hand of the Good Shepherd who provides you with the basic stuff of life that sustains you.

And why is it that Jesus makes us to *lie down* in green pastures? Sheep can't digest grass completely until they lie down, and sometimes they don't have the sense to do so on their own.⁴ Can you see how this Psalm might be a parable for us? Even in the course of 24 hours, there is such a thing as too much of something, even good things: too much food, too much work, too much sun, too much talking, too much sitting around, even too much Netflix. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he knows what we need in good measure, and he teaches us healthy rhythms of life.

5 And of course, we need the Good Shepherd because without him, we're prone to become so focused on eating grass that we become oblivious to the sheep around us and wander off, far from the flock. Sheep really do this, which is why in the Gospel of Luke Jesus tells the parable about the lost sheep.⁵ Fortunately, if you've got a smart phone in your pocket it's much harder to get lost than it used to be. But Jesus wasn't talking about that kind of lostness. The Good Shepherd seeks out those who are spiritually lost, those who are looking for their daily bread from something or someone other than Jesus. God has every right to sit on the divine throne and insist we come to God, but that's not what the Good Shepherd does. See how great the love of God is for us, the sheep of God's flock, that Jesus would leave the ninety-nine and go after the one who is lost!

⁴ <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/96303-the-problem-with-sheep>

⁵ Luke 15:4-7

I wonder if there are ways in which you're lost today. If we're honest, we'll admit that it's possible to be lost without even knowing it! What are some signs that you might be lost, that you might have strayed too far from the Good Shepherd? A feeling of emptiness inside that you can't seem to fill or satisfy is one sign. An abundant harvest of what I'd call the "anti-fruit of the Spirit" is another, like irritability, violence of words, feelings, or actions, or a loss of desire to serve others in love. Sometimes when you're lost, you can find your way by setting out in one direction and hoping you come to a landmark like a road or a lake. But when we're spiritually lost, we don't need to find a landmark so much as a person. We need to return to the Good Shepherd, the one who sends us the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and bear good fruit. To do that, we may need help from our sisters and brothers in the flock.

6 Remember Craig Rogers, the modern shepherd I mentioned earlier? Here's what he has to say about the business side of shepherding:

When I speak to the general public about the business of livestock farming I refer to "harvesting lamb." But I never fool myself. My job is to kill lambs for food...Although I take my animals to a slaughter house to be processed..., I always kill one myself each year for food. It is never easy for me, but it reminds me what my job is. It helps remind me of the value of each lamb and sheep on the farm, and their death is never taken lightly.⁶

Craig's essay points to the most profound reason that we all need to stay close to the Good Shepherd. Most human shepherds make their living at the expense of the sheep. Even I, your pastor and spiritual shepherd, earn my living from the gifts you sacrificially share. As much as I try to be present for you, I take days off, I take vacations and attend clergy meetings, leaving you in the care of spiritual shepherds you've most likely never met. Jesus alone is a 24/7 shepherd. Jesus alone offers his life completely for the sake of the sheep. Jesus alone is uniquely qualified to make peace for us with God. Jesus alone is capable of being both the Good Shepherd of his flock and the sacrificial lamb without blemish, offered that we might find our way back to God's sheepfold.

How close are you today to the Good Shepherd? What's one thing you might do to move closer?

⁶ <https://modernfarmer.com/2013/12/10-things-learned-lambs/>



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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