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Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Acts 4:5-12 ; Psalm 23;   1 John 3:16-24;   John 10:11-18

**"I am the Good Shepherd...I know my own and my own know me...
and they will listen to my voice." †**

Some of the earliest depictions of Jesus Christ we find in early Churches and tombs are not on a Cross or in a manger scene, they are of a young Jesus in a white tunic, with a lamb draped over his shoulders. It's a recurrent subject in early iconography, Jesus *'the Good Shepherd,'* who loves and cares for his sheep.

This 'Good Shepherd' motif arises from a series of parables (*paromia* in Greek) that Jesus tells in the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John. These sayings or comparisons are used by Jesus to try to get his followers to see the truth of who he is and understand his mission. The Good Shepherd comparisons directly follow Jesus' encounter with the scribes and Pharisees after he has healed the blind man. The scribes and Pharisees are supposed to be the shepherds of Israel, the teachers, and leaders of God's people, yet they don't see who Jesus is, and cannot fathom that his works of healing (done on the Sabbath) could be of God. They are blind themselves and cannot see God working right in their midst! Jesus compares them to 'hired hands' that don't really care about the sheep, but only their own gain.

This Gospel was probably written about 90 CE for a fledging community of new 'Christian' Jews who were facing harassment from the leaders of the local Synagogue where they worshipped. It's helpful to recall something of the history here. At the time of the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem around 70 CE, people fled from the great city to other towns and provinces. The Pharisees (the great lawmakers and scribes of Israel) abandoned Jerusalem and went to the village of Jamnia, where they began to try to reconstruct Judaism in their own terms, away from a religion dependent upon priests and temple worship (because the Temple was no more and the priests where all killed) toward an emphasis on Synagogue worship and Torah. That became the basis of modern Jewish worship. Such strict legalistic worship would not have included anyone who believed that the Messiah had come, much less a group who believed the fantastic stories of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Similar conflicts are described in Acts, like the story we heard about Peter and the apostles confronting the Jewish leadership: "`the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else.'"

The writer of John's Gospel is arguing that these Pharisees, these Jewish leaders were 'bad shepherds.' They were exclusive, self-serving and would not allow anyone who thought differently to be part of the Synagogue. Jesus, however, is the 'Good Shepherd,' the kind of leadership the community yearned for— peaceful, loving, spiritual, willing to give his own life for others. The people who were hearing this parable of shepherds and sheep would have seen shepherds at work. Whether they were carpenters, fishermen, or farmers, they understood the work and commitment involved, and they knew the qualities of a good shepherd.

Now sheep, by nature, aren't very smart. I'm sorry, it's the truth, they're simple, skittish animals. They live herded together in flocks for group protection, that is, when they don't stupidly wander off on their own. Sheep are the ultimate example of 'herd mentality,' they do whatever everybody else does. And in times of danger or fear, they panic, cry, and run off & scatter. Yet, sheep do know the voice of their shepherd. They're able to sense who to trust and will follow the true voice of their shepherd and run from a stranger. I don't really think Jesus meant his comparison to be a compliment… and yet he makes it clear that he loves his sheep.

Sheep are incapable of self-care or surviving in the harsh world without someone to watch over and protect them, without a shepherd. If left on their own, they tend to wander off, and fall prey to wolves and predators, and so too the people of God. We humans are often just as fearful, just as prone to panic, and just as vulnerable as simple sheep. We tend to follow the lead of others. We're prone to get lost and confused, and even follow the lead of the world and society, unless we have someone good to look out for us, warn us about danger, and show us the way.

Jesus goes on later in this Gospel using even stronger words, stating he is 'The Gate' through which the sheepfold moves from danger to protected pasture. This passage of Scripture, as well as the passages from Acts and the First letter of John, are too often used by Christians to be exclusionary of others… an attempt to make those of us who believe in Christ somehow better than those who believe or worship differently. The gate is for the protection of the sheep… it's not exclusionary, it's not about how some sheep are better than others. It's not to keep any sheep out, but to guard them all against what threatens their well-being… to guard against the wolves, the thieves, and bandits in the world. For Jesus assures us… 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.' (10.16)
It's crucial that we all understand that the sheepfold must be accepting of others, not like the Pharisees. The goal is that we become one flock under one shepherd. And it is GOD— the Father, in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit— who brings together the flock. It is God, not us, who chooses who becomes part of His flock!

Jesus reminds us that he will not let us stray or get lost. He plays on the words of the prophet Zechariah (11.16) who warned his people that they were following a false shepherd who didn't really care, who never loved the sheep, and who made no attempt to gather together those who were scattered or lost. False shepherds work only for money and self-gain, but The Good Shepherd loves those he serves, and risked his life for them.

For there are many wolves around, howling at us through political, economic, and social venues. These wolves appear externally— through human insensitivity, alienation, and prejudice against those who are different; through addiction to drugs, alcohol, and sex; and through the anger and violence that appears too regularly in our world. They also arise internally— as self-pride, envy, loneliness, and also self-loathing, depression and despair. We humans are as vulnerable as sheep… we're prone to follow the herd too often, or to get self-involved and wander off, paying attention only to ourselves. We all like to complain about how hard we have it… Poor me! Poor us! Bah, Bah, Bah! And… we have a shepherd.

And we all get the chance to follow The Good Shepherd, to hear the voice of truth in the midst of lies, the voice of love in the midst of hatred, the voice of God in the midst of chaos. The Good Shepherd leads us toward different paths. Jesus says, 'I am The Good Shepherd, who puts the sheep before himself… and they will recognize my voice.'

As we gather around the altar, let's endeavor to listen for His voice. Let's try every day, from this moment on, to listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, and not wander off or get lost… to hear his voice over the voices of the thieves, bandits, and wolves in our midst… to follow The Good Shepherd on the right paths of justice, goodness, peace, and love.

'I am The Good Shepherd,
Listen to me, come to me, follow me…
I am the Good Shepherd, come and *you shall not want*…
I will lead you to green pastures, beside still, cool waters… along *right* pathways…
Fear no evil in this world, for you are with me…
Only goodness and love will fill your day…
If you would but listen.'

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