

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, April 25, 2021

“Good Shepherd Sunday”

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Our lessons and prayers lift up the metaphor that the Lord is our shepherd. I guess that makes us sheep.

When you think of sheep, what do you think of?

What characteristics of a sheep can you relate to? I have 9 of them here.

1. Sheep are known to wander or stray... especially in scripture. In the song “Borning Cry”, the first verse goes, “I was there when you were but a child, with a faith to suit you well, in a blaze of light you wandered off where demons dwell.”
2. Sheep are demanding. Have you ever watched a lamb suckle milk from its mother? They are relentless. They also bleat unapologetically when they are hungry.
3. Sheep are vulnerable, they are easily attacked by enemies.
4. Sheep are skittish, especially around strangers. But around their shepherd, a trusting relationship can be built. They are very loyal animals once trust is built.
5. Sheep are slow to learn. A sheep may get caught in a barbed wire fence trying to break through. And the next day it will try it again.
6. Sheep are high maintenance. They need a human to shear them. I have heard of sheep getting so much wool they tip over and can't get up without the help of the shepherd.
7. Sheep are stubborn. It is hard to move a sheep that doesn't want to move.
8. Sheep are restless. They get very little sleep at night. I once heard that for sheep to lie down they need freedom from fear, freedom from friction with others, freedom from hunger, and freedom from pests and parasites.
9. Sheep are totally dependent on their shepherd. They need the closest supervision of all livestock.

It is no wonder the Bible uses the image of sheep for us sinners. We too are stubborn, slow to learn, restless, and prone to wandering. But the Good Shepherd doesn't seem to give up on the sheep. Jesus wants us to know him like a shepherd and not a hired hand... to learn to depend on him.

Even back in 1523, Martin Luther preached a sermon on Good Shepherd Sunday about sheep:

“Sheep, you know, are most foolish and stupid animals. When we want to speak of anybody's stupidity we say, "He is a sheep." Nevertheless, it has this trait above all other animals, that it soon learns to heed its shepherd's voice and will follow no one but its shepherd, and though it cannot help and keep and heal itself, nor guard itself against the wolf, but is dependent upon others, yet it always knows enough to keep close to its shepherd and look to him for help.

Now, Christ uses this trait or nature of the animal as an illustration in explaining that he is the good shepherd. In this manner he plainly shows what his kingdom is, and wherein it consists, and would say: My kingdom is only to rule the sheep; that is poor, needy wretched human, who well see and realize that there is no other help or counsel for them.”

In the beloved Psalm 23, with the Lord as our shepherd, we lack nothing. We shall not want for anything.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures.” In light of what I said earlier, for a sheep to rest, means their basic needs are met and they are free from fear. For a sheep to lie down, that is a big deal.

This is picked up later when the psalmist says, “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and staff they comfort me.”

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” The shepherd gives the sheep a safe place to graze, safe from fear, even as they are being pursued by enemies or predators.

This psalmist describes a trusting relationship between the shepherd and the sheep that brings the sheep to a happy place. This is evident with the language of you restore my soul. Or my cup overflows.

This is an awesome shepherd that cares for and provides for the sheep... even in the valley of the shadow of death. No wonder this Psalm is so beloved by so many. This is my brother's favorite Psalm.

Then we get to the Gospel.

Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd, I lay down my life for the sheep." Jesus is not the hired hand who runs away when the wolf shows up.

Jesus, as the good shepherd, lays down his life for the sheep. He sacrifices himself for the sake of the flock. He takes the fall for all.

This is an Easter text because this is what Jesus did for us on the cross. He laid down his life for us sheep and for our salvation. He took it up again on Easter. This is pure grace on God's part. We wander and get lost often, but Jesus still takes us in his arms and loves us and forgives us.

Finally, there is that piece in the text that Jesus says "¹⁶I 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." Who are the sheep not in the fold? How can we repent of how divided the church has become?

This is our charge as Christians and as a church. We are called to draw others into the fold so there is one flock and one shepherd. How do we do this? We keep Christ at the center.

In 1st John 3

¹⁶We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Amen