

SERMON TITLE: "I Am the Good Shepherd"
SERMON TEXT: John 10:11-16 and Ezekiel 34:11-16
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 25, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

I have a brother-in-law in Oregon who used to raise sheep. Melvin made his primary living working at a lumber mill. Sheep were a secondary interest that he managed in the early mornings, evenings, and weekends. My husband and I wondered why Melvin wanted to work so hard, but there was something about raising sheep that gave Melvin satisfaction.

Being a shepherd in modern times is a lot different than it was in biblical times. Melvin didn't stand out in his field with a shepherd's crook. He was more likely to be seen driving his four-wheeler along a barbed-wire fence or using his trained dogs to herd the woolly critters. But shepherd he was, and probably still would be if the market value for lambs hadn't dropped below his costs.

Last Sunday, I began a Lenten sermon series on the "I Am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John. We started off last week with Jesus saying, "I am the light of the world." Today, in John 10, we find Jesus talking about sheep and shepherds. Because Jesus was very likely thinking about Ezekiel 34, we will reflect on that passage too. What does it mean to us that Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd"?

1—GOOD SHEPHERD IS COMMITTED TO SHEEP

The first trait of the good shepherd, says Jesus, is that he's committed to his sheep. Jesus indicates that the good shepherd won't run away from danger and leave the sheep alone. Instead, the good shepherd will stand up to the threat of the wolf. Such a commitment might mean that the good shepherd gets killed, but, according to Jesus, the good shepherd is willing to lay down his life in order to save his sheep.

Of course, when we hear these words, we immediately think of how Jesus did go up against the predators of his day. He didn't back away in fear. Jesus criticized the scribes, pharisees, and elders

because they didn't act with compassion. Jesus healed sick people at the synagogues on the sabbath day, even when the authorities told him not to. Jesus saw and named how the religious leaders valued the minute details of the law more than the glaringly obvious needs of the people. Jesus didn't keep his concerns to himself, but rather took his objections right into Jerusalem and the jaws of death. Even though they would nail him to a cross, the good shepherd wasn't going to run away from danger, because the good shepherd was and is committed to his sheep.

Maybe you remember the story about the chicken and the pig having a conversation about commitment. The chicken claimed it was obvious how committed she was to the farmer's family. She provided them with fresh eggs for breakfast every morning. The pig replied, "Well, when you commit your eggs, you get to live another day. When I provide my ham and bacon to the farmer's family, I give my all. When I lay down my life, that's commitment."

As followers of Jesus, we may be more like the chicken than the pig. But the good shepherd definitely teaches us the importance of commitment. For what are we willing to sacrifice our time, talents, and treasure? To whom are we willing to commit our lives?

2—G.S. CARES FOR OWN SHEEP AND OTHERS

The characteristics of the good shepherd are explained more in John 10:14-15. There Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me." The idea here is that the shepherd is good because he takes care of his own sheep.

It seems like an obvious and intimate relationship that we might equate to a family. Of course, it makes sense that we should take care of our own families. But we all know that even that narrow responsibility can get very complicated sometimes. What about when our family members are hard to get along with? What about when they have physical needs and mental problems that cost us too much? What about when they take advantage of us and hurt us repeatedly? What about when parents

aren't able to care for their children effectively? What about when children must juggle responsibilities to care for their aging parents?

And then, before we even have a chance to solve those challenges, Jesus goes and expands the flock, in verse 16, to include "other sheep that do not belong to this fold." Jesus says the good shepherd must go, find, and bring them, so all will be together in one flock. This reminds us of Jesus' parable of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to locate and reclaim the one that had gone astray. Whether feeling lost or happily grazing in a different field, the "other" sheep belong to the good shepherd too.

This fact that the good shepherd cares not only for those who are obviously his own, but also those who might be pasturing further away reminds me of our First United Methodist Church's mission statement. We say that *First United Methodist Church will meet spiritual needs by developing relationships with Christ, community, and the world*. The obvious flock is right here in our church, where we nurture our own relationships with Christ. But the good shepherd has more sheep out in the community and the world around us. Whether we think of ourselves as sheep or assistant shepherds, we must be willing to look beyond our own family and congregational unit. We must look out into the world to see who else needs the care of the good shepherd.

3—G.S. FEEDS SHEEP ON GOOD PASTURE

If we jump over to Ezekiel 34, we see a description of God as the shepherd who feeds his flock with good pasture. Unlike other shepherds who are more interested in eating their sheep than caring for them, God wants to make sure that the sheep can graze on a rich pasture, near water. Their basic needs of nutrition will be met by the care of their good shepherd.

Here in America, most of us sheep are very well fed, and we do what we can to support community food pantries and nutritional programs in schools. We also have governmental safety net programs like WIC and SNAP food benefits to help those who are below certain poverty levels. But we know that the good shepherd is looking more expansively, to include more people in this bounty of rich

pasture. We know that God cares for the hungry sheep who are trying so hard to migrate into our country, so they can find enough food to eat and clean water to drink. We also know that the good shepherd has sheep in countries where drought, famine, war, and distribution problems are rampant. My heart ached the other day as I heard a news story about a Palestinian woman who was nine months pregnant. But because she was malnourished, she didn't look like she wasn't pregnant, and she didn't know if she would have enough strength to deliver her baby.

In the face of such suffering, some people might curse God or deny God's existence. How can God be a good shepherd and allow such misery to exist? The concern and anguish are real. But I believe that God is a good shepherd because God shows us what is good so that we can assist in carrying out God's good work. God expects us to open our hearts. God expects us to provide humanitarian care. God expects us to share the bounty of what we have with others. God expects us to help feed all the sheep on good pasture.

4—G.S. STRENGTHENS THE WEAK

When the good pasture is shared, then healing can happen. In Ezekiel 34:16, God-the-good-shepherd says, "I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak." The green pasture is a place of safety, where sheep can lie down without being devoured by wild beasts or greedy shepherds. No longer will bullies be able to stomp on, pollute, and destroy the natural resources in their opportunistic zeal. The green pasture is a place where those who have taken too much will face the justice of limitations, so that those who have had too little will be able to grow stronger.

One of our hymns prays that we would share this vision of the good shepherd:

For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord.
 For a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords.
 To a life of love in action help us rise and pledge our word.
 Lead us forward into freedom; from despair your world release,
 that redeemed from war and hatred, all may come and go in peace.
 Show us how through care and goodness fear will die and hope increase.¹

For the healing of the nations, for the healing of our immigrant sisters and brothers, for the healing of our neighbors, for the healing of our families, for the healing of our own selves, we align ourselves with the good shepherd's care and goodness. We help provide these green pastures where healing can happen, where the good shepherd can strengthen the weak.

CONCLUSION

Well, it's time now to wrap up this sermon. So, let's do it with some humor. Here are some sheep jokes for you.

Where do sheep get their wool cut? At a baa-baashop.

What do you get when you cross a sheep and some chocolate? A candy baa.

What's a sheep's favorite snack? A baa-nana.

What's a sheep's favorite car? A Lamborghini.

Where do the sheep watch videos? On ewe-tube.

What paperwork do elderly sheep need? Their last wool and testament.

And, finally, what's the sheep's motto? All's wool that ends wool.²

Whether we learn it from the Bible or get our information from ewe-tube, Jesus is our example and teacher. May we feel safe in his sheepfold, and may we join him in including other sheep. May we share the good care of green pastures and healing for our bodies and spirits. May we be protected and inspired by the one who said, "I am the good shepherd."

¹By Fred Kaan, 1965, c. 1968 Hope Publishing Co.

²<https://www.rd.com/article/sheep-puns/>

