

WPC
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The Good Shepherd
Psalm 23; John 10:1-18

One of my favorite titles for Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Hanging in countless churches across this country are pictures of Jesus holding a lamb or standing in the midst of a flock of sheep. Such images speak of God's loving and tender care for each one of us. In the Old Testament, the leaders of God's people were referred to as shepherds. Ezekiel 34 says that the Lord himself will tend his sheep and shepherd the flock.

In many ways, it's comforting to know that Jesus is the Lord who lays down his life for the sheep, who knows his sheep by name and who leads them beside the still waters. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for each of his sheep, so much so that he doesn't want to lose even one sheep from his flock.

Glenn McDonald tells a story of the time when his parents decided to celebrate their 50th anniversary by inviting their three sons and three daughters-in-law to join them on a Caribbean cruise in February. He didn't agonize for very long over the invitation. He figured when someone hands you a free Get-Out-of-Indiana-in-February card, you take it.

“The trip was wonderful. Cruises are designed to be multisensory, it’s-all-about-me experiences for the guests. At the end of the first evening of water-gazing and overindulging in the dining room they headed for bed. While they slept the boat quietly cruised out into the open water beyond Puerto Rico. At 4:48 am, however, everything changed. They were awakened by a disembodied voice on the cabin intercom.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain. I am very sorry to disturb you so early in the morning, but we have an urgent concern. We have an unconfirmed report that a passenger has fallen overboard. We have already turned the ship around and initiated a search...Please go to your room if you are not there at this time, and account for everyone in your party. If anyone is missing, please report their name to the purser’s desk immediately.’

Thirty minutes passed. The U.S. and Dutch Coast Guards had arrived on the scene. The captain spoke a second time. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, two men are currently unaccounted for. Their names’ [these are fictional names] ‘are John Garcia and Eric Armstrong. If you know the whereabouts of either of these men please bring word to us right away.’

There were 1700 guests on the cruise boat and more than 700 crew members. From the list of 2400 passengers the captain had narrowed the search to just two individuals. Fifteen minutes later he addressed the ship

again. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we are looking for Eric Armstrong.’ The energies of everyone on board were now focused on the hunt for a solitary person. Though he was a stranger, they all knew his name.

Two hours later the sun rose above the Caribbean. Once again they heard the captain’s voice. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I am very pleased to tell you we have just found Eric Armstrong. A U.S. Coast Guard helicopter is at this moment airlifting him to safety. He appears to be in good condition. Thank you for your cooperation during this time.’

The successful search-and-rescue had a dramatic effect on the rest of the cruise. Every passenger now knew: *I’m sailing with someone who would turn this ship around in the middle of the night and come looking for me.* Who was Eric Armstrong? Was he a VIP...a U.S. Senator...the first mate...someone intimately related to the captain? No, he was a 20-year-old man who at about 4:30 am was in a restricted area and had apparently fallen off the bow while doing ‘the Titanic thing’ – *I’m king of the world!*” (Glenn McDonald, The Disciple Making Church, p. 21-23).

How wonderful it is that Jesus is the kind of shepherd who cares so much for his flock that he will focus all of his energies on finding even one lost sheep, even sheep who do stupid things.

The only problem with this parable is that if Jesus is the shepherd, then we are the sheep. That doesn't sit well with some of us, since many of us think of sheep as being very dumb animals.

However, Barbara Brown Taylor discovered that sheep are not dumb at all. She writes, "It is the cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cows. According to her friend, cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows, but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first – namely, their shepherd – who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right." (BBT, The Preaching Life, p. 140-141).

Sheep tend to grow fond of their shepherds and they learn their shepherd's voice – they will not follow another voice. Jesus says that we can know he's the true Good Shepherd because his sheep will listen to his voice. Furthermore, he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

He then says in v. 7, "I am the gate." The Greek word literally means "door" (old RSV translates this way). At night, the shepherd would often lie across the opening to the fold and become the very door to the fold to protect

the sheep. Jesus calls himself the door and anyone who enters by another way a thief and a bandit.

That's very good news for us. If Jesus is the door, then any person, any institution, any experience, no matter how good, that seeks to become the door instead of going through the door becomes a thief and a robber. If they go through the door, they're fulfilled; when they try to *become* the door, they become a thief.

That should take care of any messiah complex we may have. There's a scene in the movie "Rudy" where Rudy, the main character, is desperately trying to get accepted at Notre Dame. He sees a priest and asks him if there's anything he can possibly do to make his dream happen. The priest looks at him and says, "In all my years as a priest, I have come up with two hard incontrovertible facts: there is a God, and *I'm not Him.*" We don't have to worry about saving anyone, because Jesus is the door, not us.

The same is true of the church. The church is not and cannot be the door. We're not the gatekeepers, God is. Whenever we've forgotten that, the church has gotten into trouble.

The same is true of our families, our jobs, our money, our friends, our possessions, anything that is worthwhile in our lives. When any one of *those things becomes the door of our lives, it will become a thief and a robber.*

When we bring these things with us through the door, we'll become fulfilled. You're a better employer, better parent, better student when your life is centered on Christ, when you have your priorities straight. Jesus is making himself the door through which everything else must go; otherwise it becomes a thief. We always do better going through the door than becoming the door.

In thinking about Jesus as the only door, though, it brings up the question of whether Jesus is the only possible way to have access to God. That exclusive claim has often caused non-Christians to view Christians as being narrow-minded and arrogant. I do believe that we need to be sensitive and humble in how we share this text with non-Christians. However, I believe Jesus *is* the only way, because Jesus is the incarnation of God, but I don't always know what that will look like. Only God knows. I'm glad that v. 16 is included in this text: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." C.S. Lewis has a scene in his book *The Last Battle* where it turned out a character named Emeth was following the golden lion Aslan even though he thought he was following the false god Tash all of his life. I think that's a great insight. I don't know all the details of how God will work in other people, and I'm sure I'll be surprised at who some of his other sheep turn out

to be. But I believe that it is somehow through his son Jesus that God works. How that works I'll just leave to God.

There's one final reflection I want to share. Notice that Jesus always wants his sheep to stay with the other sheep. He brings back the lost sheep to the flock. Taylor says, "You cannot follow a shepherd all by yourself. You are stuck with this flock, or some flock, and everyone knows that sheep are, well, sheep. They panic easily and refuse to be pushed. They make most of their decisions based on their appetites and they tend to get into head-butting contests for no reason at all. But stick with the flock. It is where the shepherd can be found, which makes it your best bet not only for survival but also for joy." (BBT, p. 145).

Stick with the flock, for it's where the Good Shepherd can be found. Thanks be to God. Amen.