

Christ, Our Shepherd

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In Scripture, one of the most common ways to refer to the people of God is as sheep. As far as I can tell, this comparison is based on two main ideas. First of all, we are sheep because we come in flocks. Second, we are sheep because we aren't very good at taking care of ourselves, and we need someone to take care of us. For this reason, the leaders whom God selects in His church, whom we usually call elders, are also described in the word as shepherds. Their role is to guide and lead the congregation and to make sure that none of its members stray into disaster.

As all of us are very aware right now, as of last Sunday, this congregation no longer has elders. Because it has had elders for the past 11 years, this is a huge transition. What used to be a source of stability has now been transformed into a source of instability. We're used to looking to our shepherds for leadership; now, we're not sure where to look.

However, in this time of uncertainty, we must be careful not to forget the most important thing. Joe and John have stepped down, but that doesn't mean that the sheep here are shepherd-less. As long as we remain faithful to God, we will continue to be led by the One whom the Scripture calls the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ Himself. Even though our elders were more visible, Jesus has always been our true leader. I believe that Joe and John ruled well, but they ruled well only through the wisdom and blessing that Jesus gave them. Every time I ever met with them, and I suspect every time they ever met, they entrusted their decisions to Him, and without Him, they would have failed utterly as elders.

In this congregation, then, we may no longer have elders, but we still have Jesus. No matter what we face, if we only trust in Him, He'll bring us through it. Let's look this morning at what it means to have Christ as our Shepherd.

Jesus' First Discussion

The great discussion of Jesus in His role as Shepherd appears in John 10, and the first thing that He says about Himself in that context is that He **ENTERS BY THE DOOR**. Let's read together from John 10:1-2. Some parts of this may not make immediate sense to us. Many people in Galilee at the time of Jesus herded sheep for a living, and everyone would have been very familiar with the practice. Today, by contrast, I can't say that I have ever known a shepherd, and as far as most of us know, a sheepfold is something you do with clean laundry.

Of course, a fold doesn't have anything to do with clothing at all. Instead, it's a big outdoor pen, usually made of nothing but unmortared stone. It looks something like this. It's extremely simple and durable. Just about any of us, if we had enough time and enough rocks, could construct a sheepfold, and once we did, the thing would probably stay in place for centuries. The walls of this sheep pen have one opening in them, which Jesus calls the door, and it was the expected and obvious means of getting into the fold. Somebody who had legitimate business would enter the fold by the door, but a sheep-stealer would climb over the wall and leave with his spoils in the same way.

Here, Jesus claims to enter by the door. In other words, He came to God's people in the legitimate and open way that God's people would expect Him to come. We find this endorsement of Jesus' legitimacy in the Old Testament. Over and over again, the Old Testament prophesies in great detail about who the Messiah would be and what He would do, and Jesus fulfilled those prophecies to the letter. He entered by the door, not by climbing over the wall.

Second, Jesus says He **CALLS HIS OWN**. This point appears in John 10:3. It was quite common in the ancient world for several shepherds with several flocks to meet together in an area that had good pasture in a particular season. When this happened, the shepherds would take advantage of the proximity of other humans to get some time off. They would put the sheep of several different flocks into one big sheepfold and leave only one shepherd to keep watch.

When the shepherd came back from his day off, he wouldn't have to go into the fold and drag his sheep out one by one. Instead, he would just stand at the door and call. The sheep that were part of his flock would recognize his voice, get up, and exit the fold. The sheep that weren't part of his flock would ignore him and stay right where they were.

In the same way, friends, if we ever get to wondering whether we belong as part of this church that belongs to Christ, there's an easy way to know. When He calls us to do something, do we get up and follow Him, or do we stay right where we were, doing nothing? If we respond to the voice of Jesus, we are His sheep. If we don't, we aren't.

Third, Jesus tells us that the shepherd **GOES BEFORE THEM**. We read about this in John 10:4-6. Just like human beings, many herd animals are stubborn creatures. My dad talks about how when he was growing up on a farm in Missouri, when it was his job to get the cattle moving, he got behind the herd and started throwing rocks at the cows. Only after they took enough rocks to the ribs would they go the direction he wanted them to go. Apparently, sheep aren't like that. They are docile enough that when they see their shepherd out in front, they'll follow obediently behind him.

Like the shepherd, Jesus goes before us. He lived His life on earth as an example of the way that we should live our lives. He means for us to follow in His steps. This is such a blessing because it frees us from the moral uncertainty that bedevils so many people. We often recognize that lying is a sin that will get us in trouble down the road, but in reality, any sin comes with consequences that we weren't expecting. The devil loves to mislead us, confuse us, and make our lives miserable. By contrast, if we will only follow Jesus, life becomes both simple and joyful.

Jesus' Second Discussion

Next, we see that Jesus **IS THE DOOR**. He makes this claim in John 10:7-9. At first glance, this seems like a bizarre way for Jesus to describe Himself. How can a person be a door? This makes perfect sense, though, when we think about sheepfolds in Palestine. They were extremely simple enclosures and didn't have gates with expensive metal hinges or anything else worth stealing. They just had a hole in the wall. At night, when the shepherd slept, it was his job to sleep in the hole in the wall, so that the sheep couldn't get out, nor some intruder get in, without awakening him. Because the fold didn't have a door, it was the shepherd's job to be the door and thus keep the flock safe.

Today, the only way in to God's protective care is Jesus. We must enter God's kingdom through Him and the plan of salvation that He has established. Once we are in the fold with the rest of the sheep, Jesus will keep us safe. This is extremely important for us to remember today. It's easy for us to be afraid now, afraid for ourselves, afraid for our families, afraid for this church. I sympathize with those concerns, but at the same time, it was never the elders who protected us and kept us safe. It has always been Jesus, and it continues to be Jesus. He is still the door of the sheep. He is still the One who has placed His body between us and any possible danger. All we need to do is trust Him.

Similarly, Jesus **CAME TO GIVE LIFE**. Look at John 10:10. Jesus here draws a contrast between two kinds of people and the way that each will deal with a flock of sheep. A thief has no concern for the well-being of the flock. If he can manage it, he will steal as many live sheep as he can to sell to an unsuspecting buyer. If the sheep prove unwilling to leave, he will kill them, butcher them, and take the meat. The shepherd, by contrast, will do none of those things. He wants to nurture the flock, not exploit it. The fatter and happier the sheep are, the happier the shepherd is too.

In the same way, friends, Jesus as our Shepherd guides us to a life of abundant blessing. My dad has always said, and I agree, that the Christian life is the good life. Satan doesn't attempt to lure us away from Jesus because he wants us to have fun. Instead, like the thief, the devil's goal is to steal and kill and destroy. It is Jesus who wants what is best for us. When He forbids us to do something, it's because that thing will harm us. When He leads us to do something else, it's because that thing is good for us. The more we follow Him, the better off we will be, and the happier we will be.

Jesus also says of the shepherd that he **LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE** for the sheep. This idea appears in John 10:11-13. In the time of Jesus, herding families depended on their flock for their livelihood. There was no sheep insurance to replace the flock if something destroyed it. That meant that the flock was more important than the shepherd. If the shepherd, perhaps a teenage boy, ran away and allowed a wolf to ravage and scatter the flock, that would spell doom for his entire family. It was his responsibility to defend the flock, even at the cost of his own life. A hired hand, on the other hand, wasn't invested in the flock like that. It belonged to somebody else, so he had little motivation to risk his own life to defend it. If a wolf showed up, too bad. He was going to save his neck first and then worry about the sheep.

Like the good shepherd, Jesus is invested in us. He considers us more important than Himself, and that's why He was willing to die for us. Satan, like a roaring lion, was looking to devour the flock, and the only way that Jesus could defeat the lion was to forfeit His own life. We couldn't defend ourselves, so He shed His lifeblood to defend us.

Jesus also **KNOWS HIS OWN**. He asserts this in John 10:14-15. To us, one sheep looks just like another sheep. I couldn't pick a particular sheep out of a lineup if my life depended on it. For shepherds, though, that wasn't true. They spent so much time out in the fields with those sheep that they could tell one from another. To them, those sheep were as distinctive as human beings are to us. The shepherds even named the sheep. Every sheep in a flock of perhaps a hundred had its own name, and answered to that name. That strikes me as bizarre. I can't imagine investing that much thought and effort in a herd animal with the IQ of a potted plant, but that's what the shepherds did.

Jesus knows us in the same way. There are people out there who question the Bible because they can't believe that an all-powerful God would waste His time being concerned with creatures as insignificant as we are. I admit, in the grand scheme of things, we are pretty insignificant, but Jesus cares about us anyway. We may not feel like we matter to anybody else, but we can be certain that we matter to Jesus, that He is just as concerned about the daily workings of our lives as the shepherd is with the well-being of his sheep. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves.

Finally, Jesus **BRINGS OTHER SHEEP**. Read with me from John 10:16. Presumably, real-life shepherds would add sheep to their flock from time to time, and here Jesus asserts that He is going to do the same thing in a spiritual sense. Most directly, Jesus is referring here to the day when He would bring the Gentiles to serve God and be part of His church too, but this passage also has application today. We may fear that without elders, this congregation will struggle to grow numerically and spiritually as it has in the past. Certainly, the elders helped with that work, but it is Jesus who adds sheep to this flock and causes it to prosper. We must trust in Him to do that work too.

As we look at these promises that Jesus makes to us, and as we consider how ably He fulfills them, we must acknowledge that we owe Him everything. Because we are sheep, we do need help, and He gives us all the help that we need. Like a good shepherd, Jesus cares for us untritingly and unceasingly. Although we are men and He is God, He cares more for us than He cares for Himself. He has given everything He can to provide for us, even His own life. How thankful we should be that we have a Shepherd like that! Let's think about this as we partake of the Lord's Supper.