

Easter 4B, 2009

Text: John 10:11-18

Title: The Good Shepherd

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No vacation for Jesus. Jesus doesn't take a week off. Even on a beautiful spring day like today, Jesus is still at work. He's here again this morning. He's here to serve you.

Last week He was here to join Rachel to His death and resurrection, and make her part of God's family. The week before He came among His frightened disciples, bringing peace and forgiveness. Today, He is here once more, caring for us as our Good Shepherd.

Jesus says, I am the Good Shepherd.

When you hear those words, a picture immediately comes to mind. There's a middle-aged man with shoulder-length wavy brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He's wearing a long, flowing robe, and there's large staff in His hand. He's standing in the middle of a beautiful green pasture. And there are fluffy white sheep following behind him. He might even have a lamb in his arms or up on his shoulders.

He's a handsome man. He's the picture of strength and care and serenity. It's a pleasant picture. It's a calming picture. It's a happy picture. Jesus, the Good Shepherd. It's a picture you see above you every time you leave this sanctuary.

Yet to those who heard first heard Jesus speak these words, the phrase "good shepherd" was an oxymoron. The phrase "Good Shepherd" made no sense. You see, in those days being a shepherd was not an honorable profession. Boys did not grow up wanting to be shepherds. Girls did not grow up hoping to marry a shepherd. Shepherds were not good.

Shepherds were hired hands, men who were poor and didn't have any land of their own. Sometimes shepherds were the youngest boys in the family.

David, you remember was a shepherd, and he was the youngest of seven. When Samuel came to his father's house to anoint the new king, David wasn't even invited. It doesn't even cross Jesse's mind that David, the shepherd boy, could be the one. How could a shepherd be made king?

The shepherds were the lowest on the food chain. The shepherds were the minimum wage earners, the burger flippers of the ancient world.

Shepherds weren't only disrespected, they were dishonorable folks.

Shepherds were thieves. They were out in the fields by themselves. There were no managers or supervisors watching over them. If they got hungry, they might take a lamb for a snack and blame it on the wolves. Or the shepherds might try to sell meat or wool from their flocks on the side to make a few extra bucks.

When the Rabbis put together a list of dishonorable professions, shepherd was at the top of the list.

You couldn't trust a shepherd. They didn't own the sheep, they just moved them from field to field and cared for them. If a wolf or a bear or a lion attacked, most shepherds would run the other direction. And who could blame them? Would you give your life for a sheep?

A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to do some dog sitting. A friend of a friend was going on vacation and needed someone to watch her house and care for her three dogs.

Now, I'm not a dog person. I was bitten by a dog when I was younger, and was scared of them for a long time. I've outgrown that, but I'm still not that big on dogs. But I could use the money, so I took the job.

It was just that, a job. I fed the dogs and let them out. I gave them medication and even played with them. But I had no great attachment to the dogs. In fact, most of the time they were annoying. They were loud and needy, and wouldn't leave me alone, they constantly needed attention.

If there was some circumstance where the dogs were in danger, I couldn't see myself laying down my life for these dogs. I would not die for these dogs. And most shepherds would not die for their sheep.

But Jesus is different. Jesus is not the typical shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

Jesus explains what makes Him different. Jesus says that typical shepherds run away at any sign of danger. They are only in it for the money. But not Jesus. Jesus is not getting paid. Jesus loves His sheep. Jesus loves you to the point of death. Jesus loves you and Jesus died for you.

Jesus cares for you as a shepherd cares for His sheep. In Psalm 23 we see what that looks like.

Jesus leads you beside the still waters of Holy Baptism.

Jesus guides you in the paths of righteousness as He instructs you in His word.

Jesus is with you even in the valley of the shadow of death and He cares for you.

Jesus' rod and His staff gather you together as one flock, bringing back those who stray.

Jesus prepares a table for you to feed you with His body and His blood.

Jesus will bring you home to dwell in His house forever.

It's a comforting picture, one that gives you peace when danger comes. When the wolves surround you, when valley gets dark, when the path gets rough, Jesus is there to care for you and lead you through.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He won't run away when the wolves attack. He won't let you fall when the path becomes treacherous. He's not like all those other shepherds out there.

He lays down His life for you.

Our Epistle lesson tells us what that means for us. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in Him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

We are all members of God's family. We learned that last week. God is our Father, and we are all His brothers and sisters.

Take a look around you, once more. This is your family. These are your brothers and sisters. You should be ready to die for anyone here in this room. If there is someone in need, you should be ready to give whatever you have for them.

We're all in this together. We are one family. If one of us is hurting, we are all hurting. If one of us is in need, we are all in need. And if someone is in need, we give them what they need. It's that simple.

This is what love looks like. Love is unconditional. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for you. You didn't deserve it. You didn't earn it. He loved you and died for you. This is the definition of love.

Your brothers and sisters in this congregation cannot earn your love. They don't deserve it. Love them, still.

How can you do this? How can you love folks like this? How can you love your family members even when they say and do things that hurt you deeply?

Only when Jesus lives in you. John writes- Those who obey His commands live in Him and He lives in them.

When Jesus lives in you, you find yourself loving your brothers and sisters, even when they're mean and nasty and hurtful to you, just as Jesus loved and forgave even those who crucified Him.

When Jesus lives in you, you find yourself giving your money and your possessions away to those in need, just as Jesus gave everything, even His life for the world.

When Jesus lives in you, you find yourself laying down your life for your brothers and sisters, just as Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for the sheep.

How does Jesus get in you?

Jesus gets in through your skin with the water and the name in Holy Baptism.

Jesus gets in through your ears as you hear His words of love and forgiveness.

Jesus gets in through mouth in the body and blood of the Lord's Supper.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and this is how He makes you good, like Him.

No vacation for Jesus. Not even three weeks after His death and resurrection. Your Good Shepherd is still caring for you, and working through you to love your brothers and sisters.