

# "The Goodness of the Good Shepherd"

## John 10:11-18

April 26, 2015

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. It is a relatively minor unofficial observance on the liturgical calendar, yet it is one beloved by many. Why? I think it is the cuteness and sentimentality of the theme. After all, who doesn't like the thought of sheep and a shepherd? It gives such a warm and fuzzy feeling. But is it accurate?

We tend to think of sheep as being cute and cuddly creatures who are docile and obedient. Why, it's no wonder then that the Bible compares us with sheep, right? We may not think of ourselves as "cute and cuddly", but we generally have a pretty high opinion of ourselves. Each of us probably thinks of himself or herself as basically a nice person who does their best at being good. Sure, we accept the old adages of "no one is perfect" and "we are all human", but none of us thinks of himself or herself as being all that bad. We mostly do good most of the time. So, in this way, we are like cute and obedient sheep.

Or, are we? Being a city boy most of my life, I haven't had a whole lot of contact with sheep, but the Bible doesn't describe sheep in that way. The Bible describes sheep as disobedient and rebellious creatures who often ignore the voice of their shepherd and frequently wander away from the fold. The sheep, being ignorant or stupid, probably think they are going in a good and safe way. But the way they go when they wander away exposes the sheep to danger and death.

The Bible says we are like sheep in this way. We are disobedient and rebellious creatures who often ignore the Word of God and wander away from our Lord. Isaiah puts it this way: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way;" (Is. 53:6) Of course, each of us thinks his or her own way away from God is the good and right way. Rarely will one say, "I know this is wrong and is turning me away from God, but I'm going to do it anyway." No, we are

either ignorant of God's Word or stupid enough to think that our way is the right way, despite what the Word of God says. We will defend our going astray, justify our going astray, and stand by our going astray. Yet, by going astray, each of us exposes himself or herself to danger, death, and damnation eternally in hell.

What about the shepherd? What's he like? I think we have an image of a shepherd as being a kind and gentle man. He provides food and drink for his happy flock and then skips off into the sunset, smiling and singing, while his cheerful sheep willingly follow. A shepherd can have a rather wimpish reputation in our minds.

We KNOW that's not an accurate image of sheep. But is it an accurate image of a shepherd? Sometimes, I think we superimpose this soft and easy image of a shepherd on Jesus when He says, "I am the Good Shepherd." Look at some of the art work and music that depict this theme. Jesus is depicted as a soft – even wimpish – shepherd. We think of Jesus as a nice guy whose only job it is to "make me lie down in green pastures [and] lead me beside still waters." In other words, Jesus' job as Good Shepherd is to take care of my needs and my wants and make me happy.

This soft image is not an accurate representation of Israeli shepherds or Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Shepherds back in Bible times were tough guys. Sure, they fed and watered their flocks, but they did so much more. It was their duty to protect their sheep from danger and rescue their sheep when they wandered off and were attacked by enemies like wolves or lions. Shepherds had to be strong, brave, and skilled with a weapon (like a sling shot) so that their stupid sheep could be protected and their wandering sheep could be saved.

Jesus, as our Good Shepherd, is no namby pamby shepherd. He *does* indeed provide for our physical needs to support our bodies and lives. He blesses us with many luxuries to make us happy and our lives enjoyable. But He doesn't stop there. Providing for all our physical needs and many of our desires is not what make Him a "good" shepherd. Jesus says what makes Him "good". He says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

In Bible times, hired hands who did not own the sheep would take care of the sheep, but would never give up their lives for the sheep. They would flee when trouble approached because they were only concerned about their wages. But would shepherds give up their lives for their sheep? They would work hard to protect their sheep. They would fight hard to rescue their sheep.

But die for their sheep? That's a different story. Shepherds would rarely die for their sheep. If they did, it would be accidentally and not on purpose. And as noble as it sounds to lay down one's life for someone, it would be disastrous for a shepherd to do that for sheep. With a dead shepherd, the sheep would be left alone and exposed to further attacks by the enemies.

Jesus is a different, stronger, and better shepherd. Jesus cares for you more than just in a physical way. Even if you had all that you needed and all that you wanted from this life, it would not be enough. Because of your sinful refusal to listen to the Word of God and your self-centered wandering away from the Lord's way, you will die, not only once here on earth, but forever in hell.

Jesus, your Good Shepherd, came to this earth to protect you from such a horrendous fate and to rescue you from all that you, by your sins, had deserved. That is why He laid down His life. Jesus' death was not unexpected. It was characteristic of His mission for you and me on this earth. It was foretold by the prophets centuries before it happened.

Jesus' death was not accidental. He was not surprised by the plotting of the Jewish leaders, the wavering of Pontius Pilate, or the sentence of death by crucifixion, as if He were some tragic victim who was in the wrong place and wrong time. Several times, Jesus Himself said that He was going to Jerusalem to be arrested, tried, tortured, and crucified. Then Jesus went to Jerusalem and experienced all those things. Jesus was not killed. Jesus voluntarily laid down His life for His sheep – you, me, and all people – on purpose.

Jesus' death was not disastrous for His sheep as a normal shepherd's death would have been for his sheep. Jesus' death was precisely what was needed to save His sheep from their rebellion and their wandering. Reading the rest of the passage quoted earlier from Isaiah explains

this. Isaiah wrote, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Is. 53:6) God took all of our sin and put it all on Him on that cross. God turned all of His anger away from us sinful sheep and put it all on Jesus. God punished all of our sin by punishing Jesus and not us. This is no soft or wimpy shepherd here. Jesus takes on Satan, takes on sin, and takes on death itself. And by that, God does away with Satan’s power to defeat us, forgives our sin, releases us from the power of death to frighten us, and restores us, His wandering sheep, back to His fold.

But there’s more. Jesus is even a stronger shepherd than all of that. Jesus not only has the power to lay down His life. Anyone can do that, I suppose, if they want to. We are encouraged in our epistle reading to lay down our lives for our brothers. But Jesus does even more. Jesus also has the power and authority to take up His life again. Jesus says, “For this reason my Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.”

Jesus has the power to take up His life and leave the tomb and He did it. He did it so that He could do the same for you, me, and all of His sheep. Jesus has the power to take us up from our graves and give us life and He will do it. This is why death no longer frightens us. Death no longer has the final say in our lives. The grave can no longer hold us. We shall live again and live forever in the eternal care of our Good Shepherd.

So let us celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday with an accurate view of both sheep and shepherd. Let us not think too highly of the sheep as soft warm innocent creatures. We are stupid and ignorant sheep who have rebelled against our shepherd and wandered away from the safety of His fold. Let us also not think lowly of our shepherd, Jesus, as a soft and wimpish shepherd who just gives us what we want. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is a strong and mighty shepherd who had the authority to lay down His life as a sacrifice for our sin that we might not die forever and who had the authority to take up His life again for us that we might live forever. Our Good Shepherd, Jesus

Christ, who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside the still waters in taking care of our physical lives, will lead us through death and past the grave to care for us in His eternal fold.

THAT is a reason to celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. Amen.