

“Know”

John 10:11-18

Before I mention the “word” that I’d like to have with you this week (though I think you already KNOW), or tackle the main image of today’s Scripture, I’m wondering if talking about Jesus as the Good Shepherd is too familiar for some of us or perhaps totally foreign to others. Maybe the first line of today’s reading where Jesus says, “*I am the good shepherd,*” would make more sense in the larger context of all the other places in John’s Gospel where Jesus declares “*I Am*” *the gate, the shepherd, the bread, the way, the light, the vine, and the resurrection.* You do realize—that’s not a typical way most people talk?

Years ago, on the news program *60 Minutes* the singer Paul Simon said that not long after Simon & Garfunkel released their iconic song *Mrs. Robinson* with its refrain “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio, a nation turns its lonely eyes to you,” DiMaggio himself contacted Paul Simon to say he was baffled as to what that line could possibly mean. After all, DiMaggio had not gone anywhere. He was constantly on TV as the spokesman for Mr. Coffee! “He had not yet,” Paul Simon told Ed Bradley, “Begun to think of himself as a *metaphor.*”

Good observation. But then, who does think of him or herself metaphorically? Wouldn’t we wonder about a co-worker who was heard spouting lines like “I am the antibody that protects my family from the virus of secularism,” or “I am the oil that keeps our company’s pistons well-lubed”? Who talks that way?

As it turns out, Jesus did. And as C.S. Lewis once observed, a man who spouts such lines such as “*I am the Light*” and “*I am a Gate*” is either the single most important person you will ever meet or as nuts as someone who claims to be a poached egg. Christians find John 10:11-18 so meaningful because we’ve also chosen to believe what Peter said in Acts 4: “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*” Peter is claiming that Jesus is now so vital, that only by *his name* can a person be saved. Because that is true, all those otherwise odd “I Am” sayings in John begin to sound not so odd after all.

And have you ever noticed that the Gospel of John is oddly devoid of the much-loved parables of Jesus that make up such a significant portion of the other three gospels? Maybe by the time John put his gospel in writing (he was the last one to write) he figured the world did not need a third or fourth re-tread of some of those great stories Jesus used to tell. Instead, John took note of another tendency Jesus had when speaking: His use of the phrase “I Am.” John knew that this phrase would reverberate with the people familiar with the divine Name that emerged in Exodus 3:14. “*Say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you*” is what God told Moses when Moses wanted to know what to call him when the people ask “*What is his name?*” So, every time Jesus opens his mouth to start a sentence with the Greek phrase “*I am*” scripturally astute people would know the weight and importance of those words coming out of Jesus’ mouth.

Likewise, whenever Jesus uses the pastoral image of a “good shepherd” for himself, the point is the same: As the good shepherd of his sheep, he will risk his life and even temporarily abandon the flock if that’s what it takes to save even one lost sheep. As the true shepherd who loves his sheep, he will let himself be killed rather than see one single sheep be harmed. In every image of the flock which Jesus employs, it’s always clear that as important as the whole flock is, each individual sheep is as important to him as the larger group is. That’s the nature of Jesus as Good Shepherd.

David of course said, “The Lord is my shepherd” in Psalm 23, but many people think about that today. Instead, we hear about multi-national corporations doing cost-benefit analyses for their products. They calculate how much risk they can get away with, in an effort to pad the bottom line by not investing extra money in additional safeguards or doing further costly research. Some food companies have been known to let certain products hit the market despite knowing there is a slight risk certain people could get sick from this food and maybe even die. But if the percentage of people at risk is small enough to be *statistically insignificant*, then they forge ahead. Politicians live by the polls, so they base some pretty big decisions on projected outcomes. Even if some people are

disadvantaged by this or that program cut, if the majority of their constituents will benefit, then those who will be harmed are pushed aside as *statistically insignificant*. Jesus says that no one is *statistically insignificant*!

“Not my circus, not my monkeys.” It’s a saying that covers a multitude of reasons not to get involved in a situation that requires intervention. Sometimes it’s because we’ve got our boundaries outlined and we’re learning not to stick our nose in everything. But most of the time, we mean it as a commentary: Not my job! I don’t get paid enough for that! I didn’t make that mess, and I’m not cleaning it up! It’s the attitude of the “hired hand,” but it’s never the attitude of the loving Good Shepherd who cares for the mischievous and the well-behaved sheep all the same. Or as I once heard a teacher say, “God counts by ones.”

In other words, ours is a world and a society made up of hired hands with very few true shepherds around anymore. But then, it’s for this very reason that we could all use a truly Good Shepherd in our lives. Now more than ever.

Those of you who are familiar with classic art may recall a funny habit that many Medieval painters practiced for quite a long time in Europe, and particularly in Germany. Artists such as Cranach and others painted many depictions of biblical scenes but they did so with the curious twist of dressing the biblical characters in the contemporary garb of the Middle Ages. So in one Cranach painting, you see Mary and Joseph tending to their newborn son in a Bethlehem stable. You also see shepherds and others in the picture but every last one of them looks like a then-contemporary European. The men are wearing tights, silk shirts with puffy sleeves, and those big hats common to that era. All in all, it was a strange way to contemporize ancient stories.

Can you imagine what most Christians today would say if some artist painted a portrait depicting Joseph in a pair of Gap jeans, Mary wearing Ralph Lauren dress, and the magi in snappy suits from Armani? Some might object to importing the holy, sacred images of Scripture into a contemporary setting. It creates confusion and doesn’t seem terribly respectful. And anyway, we risk

“losing” something of the original presentation by mixing it up with the trappings of our modern world.

The odd thing is that although the world still has shepherds in it, the experience of *being around* a shepherd is as foreign to most of us as being around a real cowboy in Wyoming or with some Inuit fishermen in Alaska. We know that such people exist, but we don't have much to do with them, so their jobs and lifestyles don't loom large in our consciousness. We know far more about teachers, lawyers, doctors, businesspeople, and accountants than we do about shepherds.

Although the imagery seems outdated, has humanity really outgrown its need for someone to love us fiercely and forever the way only a truly good shepherd can? Jesus is the good Shepherd because he gives his life for the sheep. This is why he has come. He cares for the sheep daily, watching, feeding, and protecting them. But in the end, he must finally deal with their greatest danger. He faces the evil one who spreads darkness and disorder through his own minions and false shepherds. The good Shepherd will give his life at the cross in the last struggle with this enemy and he will overcome.

Jesus is also the good Shepherd who *knows* the sheep and they *know* him. There is a loving intimacy between Shepherd and sheep. The Shepherd *knows* the weak and the strong, the stubborn and the submissive ones, the hurts and the needs of every sheep. It is in that knowing love for his sheep that the Shepherd lays down his life. The pain and joy and healing of his death is not for a particular flock but is so universal and far-reaching that other sheep will hear his voice and come. There will be one Shepherd and one flock, not many. As the woman at the well, the man at the pool who couldn't walk, and the man born blind have heard and come, so finally his voice will be heard throughout the whole Gentile world. Those who are outside also will be included.

Has our need for a good Shepherd really faded just because our familiarity with sheep and shepherds is not as current as it was for the people who first heard these words spoken by Jesus? Hardly. We still live in a dangerous world. There

are still wolves around every corner. We will never come to a day when we do not need Someone who will care for us no matter what. We need Someone who can see the wolf running our direction and who will choose to get killed himself rather than abandon any one of us sheep as *statistically insignificant*. We need someone with the vision and wisdom to lead us safely through the landmines of life in a world that is as bewildering as this one often proves to be.

Roger Fredrikson, long-time pastor of First Baptist Church in Wichita Kansas, once said, “In the years we have served this courageous inner-city congregation we have watched in amazement as the Shepherd has gathered his flock— hearing his voice and coming. One of these was Anna—frizzy-haired and anxious, to let us know how desperately she wanted to be a part of Jesus’ flock. Her childhood had been filled with anger and trouble. Now two of her sons were in the state penitentiary, one for life, and her daughter was in a recovery program. Anna always seemed to call our home during mealtime or late at night, either to vent her hostility, “I’m never coming back to that church again,” or to confess her love for all of us, “I don’t know what I’d ever do without that church.” What joy it was to watch our people, at first cautiously, but then freely, accept her as one of us, as Anna came to *know* the Shepherd who *knows* her and loves her forever.”

Unless you really think you know how to see your way through today’s ethical quagmires of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering, then you need to be led by someone vastly smarter than you. Unless you really think that on your own you can resolve the tough questions of justice and peace which confront us today, then you need a Shepherd you can trust to lead you toward a better day. So go ahead and put your trust in Jesus the Good Shepherd. He said, “*I know my sheep and my sheep know me*” (v. 14).

Get to know him, because one thing we cannot deny is that more than ever, we all need a Shepherd. Amen.