

I AM the Good Shepherd

6/7 I AM Series

John 10:11-18

Psalm/Passion Sunday

03 28 2010 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Introduction

You can tell a lot about people by the way they **introduce** themselves. The first sentence typically begins with the words *"I am."* Then we fill in the blank with name, spouse, children, vocation, school, hobby, and more.

During our Lenten worship series, we are exploring the **seven "I AM" statements of Jesus** in John's gospel. Jesus said: *"I AM . . . the door . . . the light of the world . . . the bread of life . . . the way, the truth, and the life . . . the true vine."*

Today's lesson contains one of the most familiar and beloved *"I AM"* statements of Jesus. In John 10:11, Jesus said: ***"I AM the good shepherd."***

I. I AM the Good Shepherd

Sheep played an important role in the agrarian society of Biblical times. A shepherd caring for his flock was a common sight in Israel. Therefore, it's not surprising that the Scriptures used this imagery repeatedly to describe the relationship of God to his people. King **David**—who began life as a shepherd—wrote about these pastoral scenes often in the Psalms. In Psalm 100:3, he wrote: *"Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture."*

One of THE best known and loved passages of the Bible is Psalm 23. Say the first verse with me: *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."*

Jesus used the image of a shepherd caring for his sheep to describe himself. Luke 15 contains several parables that deal with the theme of being "Lost and Found." When the religious leaders criticized Jesus for associating with "sinners," Jesus told them ***"The Parable of the Lost Sheep."***

Jesus said, *"Suppose you have one hundred sheep and one of them gets lost. What would you do? You would leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go search for the lost sheep until you find it. Then you would return home with the sheep on your shoulders and say to your family and friends, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep!'"* (Luke 15:1-7)

Jesus is the shepherd who seeks and saves the lost. In John 10:11, the Lord said: *"I AM the good shepherd."* And the people understood exactly what he meant.

II. We are the Sheep

We live in a time and place quite different from first century Palestine. Few if any here have ever spent much time around sheep. However, there is still something within us that intuitively resonates with Jesus' words. The 23rd Psalm stirs deep emotion when we say, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."*

PP4 THREE SHEEP

But let's carry that progression a step farther. If the Lord is our shepherd, then that makes us . . . **SHEEP!** This is NOT the most flattering of descriptions. Suppose I described this congregation as "a bunch of sheep." Would you take that as a compliment? NO, it would probably make us feel bbbaaaddd! Or at least sheepish! Come on, did you REALLY think I would miss the opportunity to make some sheep puns?!?

Even for those who have never met a sheep, you won't be surprised to learn that the wool-heads are not the smartest animals that made it on Noah's ark. As one writer put it, "There's dumb. There's dumber. Then there's sheep!" Think about it for a moment—when was the last time you saw a flock of sheep performing in a circus act?

Sheep are so stupid that they easily get lost in the wilderness. They graze from one patch of grass to the next without looking up. Unless a shepherd herds them in, they can easily wander astray.

Sheep also possess a herd mentality. They follow the flock. Panicked sheep have been known to follow one another off a cliff.

Sheep are not sanitary creatures. Forget the cotton-ball pictures you made in grammar school. If you've ever seen the back of their fronts, it's not a pretty sight. Spend a day with a flock, and you will not be invited to many dinner parties.

A sheep's coat is so heavy that it can easily drown in shallow water. If they tip over, it is difficult for them to regain their feet. They are subject to a wide variety of diseases and parasites.

Finally, sheep are prey animals. They're defenseless but slow—NOT a good combination in the wild. Can you imagine a flock forming a "Sheep Self-Defense Force?" Well, I guess they could attend karate classes and learn how to do lamb chops! OK, that's the last sheep humor—really. I wouldn't try to pull the wool over your eyes!

It's instructional how different nationalities define themselves. The mythic symbol for Americans is the cowboy. For Scandinavians, it is the Viking. For the English, it is a knight on a steed. For the Russians, the bear. For the Chinese, a dragon. But for Israel, it is . . . sheep.

God is our shepherd, and we are the sheep of his pasture. The relationship recognizes the dependence that we have upon our Lord. We all need shepherding. We can do nothing on our own. We need God's guidance and grace. We depend wholly upon our shepherd to care for us.

III. Known and Knowing

Jesus then described the special relationship between a shepherd and his flock. He said: "*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.*" (John 8:14-15) The word "**know**" in the Bible goes far beyond a factual knowledge. It describes an intimate, first-hand knowledge based upon long-term experience. Jesus compared his relationship with the flock to Christ's relationship with God.

Jesus described how the shepherd called each **sheep by name**. In Israel, sheep were primarily raised for wool and milk rather than meat. The shepherd spent years

tending the same sheep and their offspring. He learned their individual personalities and characteristics. And as any parent knows, once an animal is given a name, it becomes a part of the family.

God calls us by name . . . In 2010, the earth's population has exceeded 6.8 billion people. The earth is one planet of nine in the solar system. Our solar system contains one star out of 200 – 400 BILLION stars in the Milky Way Galaxy. There are an estimated 80 BILLION galaxies in the universe. It is easy to feel insignificant and small.

But the good shepherd calls his flock by name. The Psalmist says that God knew us while we were still in our mothers' wombs. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. The Creator of the heavens and the earth has counted each hair upon our head. The Namer of the Stars knows each of us by name. Our Lord knows every aspect of our being—AND loves us for who we are and despite who we are.

Jesus said, *"I know my sheep AND my sheep know me."* In Jesus Christ, we experience the height, width, and depth of God's love, grace, and forgiveness. We discover that the Lord God Almighty, the creator of the heavens and the earth, is head over heels in love with his creation.

The central verse of John's gospel declares: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son; whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16)

At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus said: *"The sheep listen for the shepherd's voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow because they know his voice."* (John 10:3-4)

Jesus described a common scene in Palestine. Most towns had a communal sheepfold to house the flocks at night. The next morning all of the animals would be mixed together. However, the sheep recognized the shepherd's name. When he called them, they would follow his voice.

Ed Gentry, a Baptist minister, recalled a scene from his childhood while visiting his grandparents' dairy farm one summer. He was so excited when his grandmother announced that he was now old enough to help in the morning chores. They got up the next morning at 4:00 a.m. The small boy put on his cowboy hat, plastic chaps, leather holster, cap gun, bandanna, and cowboy hat. He was also looking for a rope to serve as a lasso to get the cows into the barn. He was surprised and disappointed as they walked through the yard how his grandmother softly called each cow by name. By the time they arrived at the barn, all of the cows had begun to line up to be milked.

Gentry concluded by saying whenever he hears the words that *"The Lord is my shepherd,"* he envisions God softly calling out names in the dark as we walk through life. Granted, a cattle prod might occasionally be more effective; however, the Lord constantly calls, woos, and invites his people into salvation.

IV. Lays Down His Life

Jesus said, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”* (John 10:11)

The *Discovery Channel* has a program entitled *Deadliest Catch* that follows the exploits of fishing boats in the Bering Sea. Deep-sea crabbing is supposed to be one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. However, serving as a **shepherd** in Biblical times could have earned the same title.

A lone shepherd led his flocks through the wilderness for days at a time. The only weapons he carried were a rod and sling. As a young boy, King David recalled how he had singlehandedly faced lions, bears, and wolves while protecting his father’s flocks. A shepherd would literally risk his life for the sheep.

Jesus Christ is the good shepherd who laid down his life for the flock. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The good shepherd became the Lamb of God, sacrificed upon the cross for our salvation.

This morning the church stands on the threshold of **Holy Week**, rehearsing the final days of Jesus’ life. In the Christian calendar, today is **Palm Sunday**. The Gospels recall the Lord’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The crowds greeted Jesus as a conquering king and the coming Christ. They waved palm branches stripped from the trees and tossed their coats upon the path.

But by week’s end, the songs of *“Hosanna”* turned into cries of *“Crucify!”* The joyful crowd became an angry mob. The Lord of life was sentenced to death and crucified upon a cross.

According to John’s Gospel, the resurrection of **Lazarus** at Bethany set these final events into motion. The Jewish leadership (the Sanhedrin) met in a panic and asked one another:

“What do we do now? This man keeps on doing things, creating God-signs. If we let him go on, pretty soon everyone will be believing in him and the Romans will come and remove what little power and privilege we still have.” (John 11: 47-48, *The Message.*)

A man named **Caiaphas** was serving as the Chief Priest that year. He cynically said to the group:

“Don’t you know anything? Can’t you see that it’s to our advantage that one man dies for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed?’ He didn’t say this of his own accord, but as Chief Priest that year he unwittingly prophesied that Jesus was born to die sacrificially for the nation, and not only for the nation but so that all of God’s exile-scattered children might be gathered together into one people. From that day on, they plotted to kill him. (John 11: 49-53, *The Message.*)

They got their chance on Thursday night when Judas Iscariot agreed to betray his Master. The guards arrested the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane. By the next afternoon, Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, dead, and buried.

According to John’s Gospel, the Lord died on the *“Day of Preparation”* for the Jewish festival of **Passover**. The religious holiday recalled how God had miraculously

delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery. On their last night of captivity, all the firstborn males in Egypt all died. However, the angel of death “*passed over*” the Jewish homes marked with the blood of a lamb.

On Good Friday while the priests sacrificed the Passover lamb in the Temple, the Lamb of God died upon the cross. The good shepherd had become the sacrificial lamb. One was given up for many. And Caiaphas’ unintentional prophecy came to pass.

IV. The Cross

We cannot begin to imagine the height, width, and depth of God’s love. “*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly . . . God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5: 6-8) Such mercy is beyond our imagination, such love beyond all comprehension. Such grace is amazing indeed.

You see, “. . . *we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*” (1 John 2: 1b-2)

The prophet Isaiah (53:2b-6) described God’s suffering servant:

*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
A man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces,
He was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.
Yet we considered him stricken by God,
Smitten by him and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
And by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have done astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way,
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Conclusion

One man dying for the people rather than a whole nation destroyed—the good shepherd—the Lamb of God—the Suffering Servant—the cross. We come before God’s altar today sin-sick and sorrow-worn. Yet we also come in the name of Jesus our Savior and Lord.

Today on Palm/Passion Sunday we enter into Holy Week. We shout “*Hosanna*” but the words echo back as “*Crucify!*” The triumphal parade became a death march. In the coming days, we will follow the footsteps of Jesus to the cross.

We began the service with palm branches and joyful singing. When we leave the service today, I invite you to exchange your palm branch for a nail. Carry it with you this week. Be reminded of God's love for your life. Recall that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

And know that in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Amen.