

## ***“I AM...the Good Shepherd”***

*Ezekiel 34:1-6, 11-16 • John 10:1-15*

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Perhaps the most important job in all of the Bible is shepherd. Think about the people in the Old Testament who were shepherds. Adam and Eve's son Abel was a shepherd. Jacob kept the flocks of Rachel and Leah's father. Moses, after he fled from Egypt the first time, kept the flocks of his father-in-law. The prophet Amos was a shepherd. And of course long before he became king, David was a shepherd. Of all the metaphors used in the Bible to describe the Messiah, I think probably the best known is that of a shepherd.

A number of Old Testament passages describe God as the shepherd of His people and Jesus fulfills all of them. The twenty third Psalm begins, "The Lord is my shepherd." Isaiah 40 says of God, "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." And our reading this morning from Ezekiel points forward to Jesus when it says, "For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered." He goes on, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak."

In our current sermon series we are looking at what are called the "I am" sayings of Jesus, statements Jesus made about who He is and what his purpose is. Last week we talked about "I am the light of the world," which Jesus said in the context of healing a man who had been blind from birth. The Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, get so angry about this miraculous healing that they expel the man from the synagogue. They were so wrapped up in the

religious rules and by the power that they gained by enforcing the rules that they considered it a bad thing that the man was healed. This is exactly what God was condemning several hundred years earlier through Ezekiel when He addressed the leaders as the "shepherds of Israel," saying, "Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them."

I am certain that Jesus had this passage in mind when he said, "He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep." He's referring to the Pharisees. He also says, "All who came before me are thieves and robbers." Just like Ezekiel, Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of using people to benefit themselves.

Then Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." Remember that every time Jesus says "I am," what he's really saying is, "I am God." So when he says, "I am the good shepherd," he's pointing us to Ezekiel 34 and the comparison between the bad shepherds, the Jewish leaders, and God Himself saying, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep."

So what does it mean that Jesus is the good shepherd? Most of us don't have any experience raising sheep, especially the way sheep were raised in ancient Israel, and so we tend to miss a lot of what Jesus is saying. So let's look a little closer. First of all, Jesus says "he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens." In

every city or town there was a common sheepfold, a place where the shepherds would bring their sheep at night. There was someone who was hired to guard the sheep against thieves and wild animals. In the morning the shepherds would go to get their sheep, who were all kept together in the pen. So each shepherd would call his sheep. Verse 3 says, "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Jesus says that the sheep know the shepherd's voice and they won't follow anyone else.

Shepherds spent a lot of time with their sheep and they gave each one of them a name. And so those sheep came to trust their shepherd, to recognize his voice, and they would follow him. We don't have any sheep but we do have a couple of dogs. One of the things I have noticed about our dogs is that they can recognize different sounds. For example, they know the sound of the mailman's truck and run to the front door to bark. But they also know the sound of our cars so that when one of us drives into the driveway, instead of barking they sit by the back door waiting for us to come in. They recognize the sounds. The sheep recognize their shepherd and know that he will take them to eat, which is a sheep's favorite thing to do.

As Jesus' sheep, you should be able to recognize when he is speaking to you. I don't mean that you hear him out loud, but you learn to hear Jesus prompting you through the Holy Spirit. As Paul says in Ephesians, God has chosen you before the foundation of the world. God calls you by name. But in order to hear Him speaking you must spend lots of time with him, which means spending lots of time reading and studying and meditating on the Scripture, especially the Gospels. You learn to recognize when Jesus is speaking in your life by spending time listening to him speak through His Word, and then actually following Him.

The next thing Jesus says is, "I am the door of the sheep." Many people consider this to be a separate "I am" statement but it's not. Jesus is really saying the same thing again. In the

warmer months the shepherds would take their flock up into the hills to graze and so they wouldn't come back to the city at night. This is what the shepherds were doing when the angel came to them announcing Jesus' birth. During this time they had a slightly different kind of sheepfold or pen. These would have walls made of stacked stones with a single opening for a doorway. But there was no door, just the opening. These pens were only large enough for one flock. Once all the sheep were inside, the shepherd would lay down across the opening so that no sheep could get out and no predator could get in without going over the shepherd.

As the good shepherd, Jesus provides for and protects his sheep. He invites you to follow him. He says, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Sometimes people will use this verse to say that Jesus wants you to have a big house and a nice car. That's not what he's saying. What Jesus wants is for you to have His peace and joy abundantly, overflowing, even when things aren't going so great for you. He wants you to know His voice and to follow Him closely. He wants you to believe His promise that He goes to prepare a place for you and that you don't have to be afraid.

And Jesus wants you to know that He has proven that it's all true. He says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." God loves you so much that He was willing to come here in person. He loves you so much that He was willing to go to the cross, laying down His life so that you could be with Him forever. He loves you so much that He wants you to know His voice and follow Him. So are you listening? And are you following?

*Amen.*