

## **The Holy Gospel according to St. John, the 10th chapter.**

And Jesus said to all the religious leaders gathered and his followers these words, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The hired hand who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away. And the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own, my own know me, just as the father knows me and I know the father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them in also and they will listen to my voice.

So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again. I have received this command from my father.

The gospel of our Lord.

## **The Sermon**

Grace and peace from the creator of sheep, shepherds and pasture.

Jesus the Good Shepherd and the Spirit who leads, who guides, who controls us into being the church.

It wasn't that long ago.

We were in Lent and we were practicing forms of meditative prayer and there was one that I think maybe you could try at home if you like this week.

Five words Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd."

You might want to ponder those words, but emphasize a different word each time.

So for example you would begin with the word "I" and emphasize that, and then the next time "am the Good Shepherd."

You may find that there are some shifts and shapes of meaning that didn't occur to you if we just blast through it and hear the words but once.

I'm hoping that the remarks that follow might be ones that perhaps influence your meditations this week or maybe you come up with something in spite of the words I'm about to say.

The Lord does work in mysterious ways you know.

Let's begin with shepherds.

It's a dirty job and someone's got to do it.

I'm looking toward the front because I'm remembering stories of a young man who grew up on a farm where they had chickens and sheep and cattle and all manner of animals.

I think he would know about shepherding.

But I think some town kids know a bit about shepherding too.

Those of you who rode patrols for public safety, that's kind of shepherding.

It's definitely a dirty and dangerous job but somebody had to do it.

And it probably would have been very easy to bail especially when you had to intervene in some of those domestic disputes where as I understand it, the most dangerous thing for law enforcement is to go to a domestic dispute.

And yet there are a couple in our midst who did just that.

We have teachers in our midst, parents, health care workers, nurses.

I have a hunch that as you leaned into some of those paid vocations that the brochure didn't tell you what a dirty job that would sometimes be.

But you got to do it.

And you did.

And what about those who have cared for a sibling or a child or a parent or a spouse?

There is no brochure that says that sometimes that too is a very difficult and dirty job but someone's got to do it.

And yet I would imagine to the person here you've taken up that challenge in one way or another, you were shepherding.

You had skin in the game, you were not hired hands.

How much more than when you think about Jesus the word become flesh coming into our midst and shepherding?

Evidently we all relate to the metaphor of shepherds, whether we fished for a living or whether we apprenticed with our dad as a carpenter as Jesus did.

I think we get something about what it is to shepherd and to be shepherded.

The skin in the game that Jesus has and that God has is astounding when you think about it.

What a risk and what a gamble that God would take to have the word become flesh and live among us in hopes of wooing us back to a world that is one day restored.

I recently heard someone say that humans are unique as sheep go.

We are unique in that we are a social animal with a very strong individual will.

And it is that uniqueness that I think probably manifests itself every day when we open, I was going to say open the newspaper, I can say that.

I know when we open our tablet and read the news or we turn on the television.

I know that God is willing to take such a risk.

And Jesus is willing to lay down his life.

And yes, he does in actuality lay down his life before the executioners.

But if we look at the whole of John's gospel, Jesus' life-giving can be tied back to things like being the bread of life.

By being that word become flesh living among us and inviting the disciples to come and see ourselves what sort of a life that Jesus lives.

Every day Jesus gave his life.

Not only for the sake of those charming twelve people who were very sheepy and sometimes more like goats, goating about and fighting about who gets to be in charge.

And Jesus shepherded them and shepherded the entire world for the sake of the restoration of all.

Could it be that our connection to the good shepherd goes back to the psalm that we sang together?

It seems a journey of faith, doesn't it?

A psalm that begins with recalling how God has led us to those green pastures and beside the still waters.

And then very abruptly it becomes very white knuckle.

And I think that's the frequently where we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death.

And that's where this shepherd with all that skin in the game continues to show up in the muck and the mess of it all.

And what are the very next words as we linger in the valley in the shadow of death?

Quiz-type, four words.

Thank you.

You are with me.

And then we hear about the shepherd's healing and feeding and tending and carrying and protection that you are with me.

Having wandered and continuing to wander this territory myself, I can sing a little bit about what that's like.

There are no magical fixes.

There are no quick ways around any of this.

It continues to be muck and mess up and down.

Grief when you don't expect it.

The adulting that comes with saying goodbye to a parent, the stuff that you thought was done that wasn't done.

Be administrative stuff, you name it.

But my comment earlier about that sense of God's geography, that there were ways that I can't explain except only to say that they happened, where I sensed comfort and God's strength and something that was well beyond my personal capacity to cope.

I think that was God showing up.

I think that's the good shepherd.

There in the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me.

There are many deaths in life though, aren't there?

Sometimes we let go of people a little at a time, as many of us have experienced.

Sometimes we have to let go of our view of the way the world is supposed to be.

Sometimes we have to let go of institutions that we thought would be there forever that suddenly aren't.

And there are all kinds of those, aren't those to the valley and the shadow of death.

And where does that leave us except, I hope, with the psalmist, say that even there in the mess in the mess, there is a shepherd who has all skin in the game, who promises to be with us and to continue to tend us, to lead us, to feed us, and to protect us.

It's important for me to say, when I use the word "us," I am using it as broadly as it can possibly be used.

Because it seems to me, if I take John's gospel seriously, the good shepherd doesn't have a little club, an enclave, or a small flock.

In fact, Jesus hints at that, doesn't he, when he says that there are others that he will bring to.

But imagine this, a shepherd willing to risk everything, to lay down life in whatever way needs to be done for the sake of us being all humanity, all creation, until one day yes, all things will one day be restored.

Amen.