

April 22, 2018

Scripture:

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

“He is the good shepherd.”

John’s Gospel ---- and John’s Gospel only ---- contains what we now refer to as ----- the 7 “I am” saying of Jesus.

The 7 “I am” sayings of Jesus.

And these 7 “I am” saying are hugely important --- because they are Jesus telling us who He is in His own words.

They are -----

“I am the **bread of life**; he who comes to Me shall not hunger.” John 6:35

“I am the **light of the world**; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life.” John 8:12

“I am **the gate**; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.” John 10:9

“I am **the good shepherd**; the good shepherd lays down His life for His sheep.” John 10:11

“I am **the resurrection and the life**; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies.” John 11:25

“I am **the way, and the truth, and the life**; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.” John 14:6

“I am the **true vine**, and My Father is the vinedresser.” John 15:1

Jesus reveals Himself clearly in these 7 short powerful sentences.

For today our focus is the 4<sup>th</sup> of these sayings --- “I am the good shepherd.”

But what does Jesus mean --- when He says I am the good shepherd?

Why does He choose to describe Himself here as the good shepherd?

And remember of course that Jesus was well aware that thousands of years after He first said this there would be people ---- us here today ---- reading these words and thinking about this.

So shepherd --- good shepherd wasn't just meant for a time or a people or a place where the idea of shepherd was far more common ---- Jesus chose good shepherd for 1<sup>st</sup> century people in Palestine ---- and He chose good shepherd for 21<sup>st</sup> century people in the region of Durham.

So what makes a good shepherd?

What do you think makes a good shepherd?

Here are a few ways we might describe a good shepherd.

A good shepherd is -----

One with a servant heart.

One who puts others first.

One who always sees the big picture.

One who is acutely aware of their surroundings.

One who is always on the look out --- one scanning their environment for movement and changes in terrain --- temperature ---- one aware of any and all conditions around them --- especially changing conditions.

And a good shepherd is also -----

One who is not afraid to confront --- one who in fact knew that they would have to confront from time to time --- face things head on ---- a wolf --- or a fox and so on.

And a good shepherd is -----

One not afraid to sacrifice.

One who knew that they were always on duty.

One who is self aware ---- one who knew themselves --- their strengths their weakness their tendencies.

One who is always ready to adapt and grow and change with changing and shifting environments --- yet all the while always remaining focused on the task at hand.

One not easily discouraged.

One not easily knocked of course or distracted.

And of course there is more as well that make up a good shepherd ---- this is but a starting point.

Servant heart ---- put others first --- see the big picture --- aware of surroundings --- on the look out --- not afraid to stand up and face things head on --- not afraid to confront danger and challenges --- always on duty -- -- ready to sacrifice themselves --- and so on.

But what about sheep?

What about the sheep ----- are there things about sheep that enable a shepherd to make the leap from just any old run of the mill shepherd to good shepherd?

Put another way ---- what do sheep best embody --- what characterizes sheep?

Total trust.

Absolute dependency.

Complete faith.

They don't need an explanation ---- instead they have deep trust ---- obedience --- and dependency that does not require an explanation or understanding.

The ability to follow --- the ability to be led.

The ability to focus in on what matters --- the ability to recognize the voice of their leader --- their shepherd.

And of course there is more.

Trust ---- dependency ---- faith --- ability to follow --- ability to hone in on and hear just the voice they need to hear.

The number one thing that stands out for me here is dependency.

Sheep are absolutely dependant on their shepherd.

Absolute dependency.

And dependency is not something that is valued in our culture.

No one values anyone who is absolutely dependent in our culture.

No one values anyone who is absolutely dependent in our culture.

And yet this is precisely what God demands of us.

This to me is one huge reason Jesus chose to reveal Himself --- to reveal God in a good shepherd ---- and sheep relationship.

To stress trust --- obedience ---- and most of all dependency.

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for His sheep.” ---- Jesus says in verse 11 today.

Rather than let one of His sheep get harmed the good shepherd will lay down His life.

Rather than let us get harmed Jesus will lay down His life for us.

In other words we can depend on Him with our lives --- because He is ready and willing to lay down His life ahead of ours.

If we stop to think about it ----- this is absolutely incredible.

Jesus --- the Son of God --- very God Himself ---- would rather die Himself than let us suffer harm --- little old us --- way off to the side in life's stage us ----- us --- you and me ----- tucked away in total obscurity as we are ----- and yet God would rather die Himself than see us suffer any lasting harm.

If that doesn't at once blow our minds ----- and also give us the greatest sense of comfort then there just might be something a little off in us --- or in our lives.

The Sovereign Lord of the universe --- very God Himself ---- willing and ready --- and then actually following through on this willingness and readiness to die --- for little old --- off to the side us --- you and me --- incredible --- amazing love --- amazing grace.

The thing about a shepherd is they are always in control of things ---- the sheep don't have to worry about a thing.

The shepherd insures there is food --- the shepherd insures there is warmth --  
- the shepherd insures they are safe ---- the shepherd insures that it is all taken care of ----- always and forever.

The shepherd is always in control ----- all the sheep need to do is follow and trust and depend on the shepherd totally.

The shepherd is in control.

The shepherd is running the show.

Jesus is in control.

Jesus is running the show.

All is good --- there is nothing for us to worry about.

If that doesn't comfort us than we simply must have our priorities askew.

The last few lines in our passage from John today are crucial.

Listen to verses 17 and 18 -----

“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life ----- only to 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 authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Listen again to how Jesus describes His life --- and death ---- and then resurrection.

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No one takes it from me --- but I lay it down of my own accord.

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This command I received from my Father.”

No one does anything to Jesus ---- no outside influence --- satan or death --- Pilate --- Roman authorities --- nor Jewish authorities ----- do something to Jesus that is out of His control.

Jesus is in control --- God is in control.

The good shepherd is in control.

“No one takes it from me --- but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”

Jesus submits --- gives way to God’s will ---- nobody ever did anything to Jesus that wasn’t part of God’s great plan ---- they key is Jesus submits and is dependent on God’s way and guidance.

“This command I received from my Father.” ---- Jesus says in our last verse today --- it’s almost like Jesus is the sheep and God is His shepherd.

“No one takes it from me --- but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

This is precisely the kind of dependency that God asks of us --- the same kind of dependency Jesus had on God.

The same kind of trust and faith and ascent that knows that despite how it looks --- despite what others may think --- despite the fact that I cannot understand it --- despite the fact that it hasn’t even been explained to me --- I trust ---- I have faith ---- I am dependent upon Him.

The way a sheep trusts and depends upon the shepherd ---- is precisely the way Jesus wants us to trust --- have faith ---- and depend on Him.

The question isn't ever about is He --- God --- Jesus Christ --- the good shepherd?

The question isn't ever about ---- what can the good shepherd do --- can the good shepherd ---- can God --- can Jesus truly save me --- is He really capable of such a grand and loving act?

The real question is can we be sheep?

The real question is can we follow --- can we trust ----- can we be totally dependant on God and not want more answers and more information.

That is the real question.

Adam and Eve wanted more information --- they wanted to be able to discern between good and evil themselves ----- they didn't want to rely on God they wanted to know themselves ---- they lacked trust --- they weren't able to be totally dependent on God --- they wanted more information they wanted more explanation --- they wanted more knowledge --- they wanted less dependency and more information --- that was their downfall --- they didn't trust God to give them what they needed they wanted to figure that out for themselves.

Tell us more give us more God and if you won't we'll get it from this guy --- this snake.

The sheep trust the good shepherd totally --- the sheep are dependent totally ----- lacking no trust what so ever.

Dependency --- total --- sheer utter dependency is what God asks of us.

Dependency --- total --- sheer utter dependency is very very very very rare.

Dependency --- total --- sheer utter dependency is very hard to come by.

It takes work --- hard work --- it takes prayer --- sincere prayer --- it takes immersing ourselves in the scriptures --- and it takes all of this over and over and over again.

Few --- very few people possess this kind of trust --- it has to be cultivated and nurtured ---- and worked at day after day --- year after year.

Sheep have it naturally --- children have it naturally --- as adults we have to work at ---- and work at it --- and work at it --- faithfully and tirelessly.

As John scholar Gary Burge rightly notes ----- Jesus as the good shepherd is not a kindly image of a man cuddling soft little lambs.

Rather the shepherd's job is severe ---- and tiring ----- and hazardous.

The fundamental element in this shepherd and sheep relationship is dependence and obedience.

The fundamental element in Jesus' relationship with God is dependence and obedience.

The fundamental element in our relationship with the Risen Christ is dependency and obedience.

And as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm reminds us the work of the shepherd --- the care of the shepherd --- the guidance and the protection of the shepherd ---- isn't just here on earth --- it's forever.

The work --- the care --- the protection of the shepherd is on through death and into new life as well.

The phrases from Psalm 23 --- "Even though I walk through the valley of death ----- and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" ---- remind us that God's care --- the love of the shepherd --- the shepherd Himself is with us forever --- in this life and the next --- in life ---- and in death --- and then in life again after death.

The fundamental element in this relationship --- between the Lord --- between me and my shepherd ---- is complete dependence and obedience.

Remember ----- we already know that He is indeed the Good Shepherd.

We already know that He is indeed the saving loving one.

We already know that He is in control.

We already know that the resurrection is real ---- heaven is for real.

We know that it all ends well for those who believe.

We know that He's got the whole world in His hands.

What we struggle with is total dependence on Him and total trust in Him and total obedience to Him.

Like Adam and Eve --- we too lack trust ---- don't naturally defer to dependence ---- we have to work at it.

Like Adam and Eve we too want more information --- more explanation ---- more understanding ---- instead of simply trusting and depending on God.

That is why we often ask too many questions or the wrong kind of questions ----- that is why we want more information or the wrong --- less than faithful kind of information ---- to a fault.

The sheep don't question the shepherd --- saying tell us why ----- tell us when --- explain it to us ----- help us to understand.

They follow --- they trust --- they are dependent.

And there is great beauty in their deep trust and dependency.

We have the greatest gift ever --- the good shepherd.

And as the Psalm reminds us --- because of Him --- we lack nothing.

The trusting sheep who wrote Psalm 23 shares that they have everything they need for an uninterrupted life of tranquility of the soul --- safety of the body and absolutely everything else they could ever need.

As Jean Vanier notes in his commentary on John and this passage specifically ----- to see ---- to accept and truly believe that Jesus is who He says He is requires spiritual maturity.

Indeed in his opening comments to John 10 Vanier says this ---

“In order to grow in inner freedom, we need others,  
and we need a spiritual father or mother who shows us the way.

Such people instill trust in ourselves  
because they trust us and see in us gifts and capacities  
that we do not always see.

Shepherds care deeply for those entrusted to them.  
But caring is not coddling or protecting;  
it implies firmness,  
helping people make clear choices.  
What is important is that people be helped to grow to fulfillment.”

This is the very crux of Psalm 23 and this is the very crux of John 10.

“Shepherds care deeply for those entrusted to them.  
But caring is not coddling or protecting;  
it implies firmness,  
helping people make clear choices.  
What is important is that people be helped to grow to fulfillment.”

The shepherd doesn't just coddle and protect the sheep --- they guide them  
and they guide them not for personal fulfillment --- “look at me” ---- but  
they guide them in order that they might be helped to grow and find  
fulfillment in God --- mature in God.

Jesus doesn't just guide us along through life as though life were maze we  
are simply trying to survive and get to the end of.

Jesus guides us like shepherd that we might grow and find fulfillment in and  
through Him --- but we have to trust Him completely and we have to be  
dependent on Him completely.

The sad thing is ---- too often think we know what we need to do in order to grow and mature spiritually ---- but we don't ----- only God does --- only the good shepherd does.

And so we have to be dependent on Him --- and trust Him.

This to me is great and comforting news.

It is one of the reasons my heart was first opened up to reality of Jesus Christ --- that it --- life ----- my life ---- isn't all about me --- and that instead I have a good and faithful shepherd to show me the way --- to lead way --- and to correct and admonish me as I grow and mature emotionally and spiritually.

As Jean Vanier rightly notes in speaking about this passage from John's Gospel ----- to trust in the good shepherd requires profound spiritual maturity.

That He is the good shepherd --- that Psalm 23 is true ----- the God in Christ ----- encourages us to depend on and trust in Him completely is the greatest of comfort.

Are there any more comforting and soothing and reassuring --- restorative words that Psalm 23?

Really --- can you think of anything you've ever laid eyes on that is more comforting than Psalm 23?

I'm not sure I can think of anything ---- except maybe Psalm 46 ----- "God is our refuge and our strength ----- a very present help in trouble --- therefore we will not fear" ----- we heard it as our call to worship today ----- but even then no I think Psalm 23 takes the cake.

I'm honestly not sure if there are any more comforting words than Psalm 23.

God gives us the great comfort --- respite --- place to call home that we ever so desperately need --- but as Jesus said we can't just half commit or be partially dependent --- we need to be all in as a sheep is all in in trusting and following their shepherd.

Remember Jesus says in Luke 9 verse 62 ---- “No one who puts a hand on the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

“No one who puts a hand on the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

It’s all in ----- it’s total dependency ---- it’s push the plough and trust --- not push and then pause to look back to see if it turned out how you wanted it to or how you hoped it would.

He is the good shepherd ---- that’s all we’ll ever need to know.

And because of this ---- it’s all going to play out --- fall out ---- it’s all going to work out well --- as God intends it to ----- it’s all going to work out just as this writer once described it this way -----

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
 He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
 he leads me beside quiet waters,  
 he refreshes my soul.  
 He guides me along the right paths  
 for his name’s sake.  
 Even though I walk  
 through the darkest valley,  
 I will fear no evil,  
 for you are with me;  
 your rod and your staff,  
 they comfort me.  
 You prepare a table before me  
 in the presence of my enemies.  
 You anoint my head with oil;  
 my cup overflows.  
 Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
 all the days of my life,  
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

That’s a pretty good summary of a life that worked out just fine thanks to the good shepherd.

He is the good shepherd ----- and so we lack nothing.

He is the good shepherd ----- and so He leads us to a beautiful place to lie down and rest.

He is the good shepherd ----- and so He quenches our thirsts and refreshes our soul.

He is the good shepherd ----- and so He guides us in the best places --- and He does so that we might glorify His name.

He is the good shepherd ----- and so even when we find ourselves face to face with death and face to face with evil --- we don't have to fear anything - --He's with us --- and He provides all we'll ever need in those challenging times.

He is the good shepherd ----- and so He feeds us --- body and soul ----- even when people deride us --- even when the challenges are great and the circumstances are difficult ---- He's there choosing us and blessing us with blessings that overflow --- more than we'll ever need.

He is the good shepherd ----- His goodness and His love follow us wherever it is we go ---- and forever.

He is the good shepherd ----- and He has prepared a place for us in God's house --- in God's presence forever.

That's the Good News of the Gospel for today.

He is the good shepherd and we lack nothing.

God's got this.

God is leading us ---- and we lack nothing in Him.

He is the good shepherd --- and so we lack nothing.

Amen.