

SERMON TEXT FOR EASTER 4B
PREACHED APRIL 21, 2018 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA
TEXT: John 10.11-18; Psalm 23; 1 John 3.16-24

Exercise: think of a time when you felt ignored, invisible, worthless. How did that make you feel?

We all have the desire, the need, to be recognized, to be important to someone, to be accepted just as we are, to be part of something larger than ourselves. I think of the theme song from the TV comedy series *Cheers*: "

"Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name
And they're always glad you came
You want to be where you can see
The troubles are all the same
You want to be where everybody knows your name."

Indeed, Jesus the good shepherd knows each of our names. Jesus the good shepherd knows each of us intimately. Jesus the good shepherd knows us better than we know ourselves. We are accepted and loved in the kingdom of God.

Today's scripture texts are peppered with the relationship between sheep and shepherd. Shepherd appears to be a favored occupation in the Bible. Abraham, Jacob, Esau and Amos were all shepherds. Moses became a shepherd while on the run. David was a singing shepherd (and author of many of our psalms) before becoming king. And then we recall the Bethlehem shepherds, the first evangelists to hear the good news about Jesus' birth and to share it with the world.

To be honest, the Bible probably values shepherds more than biblical people did. Society despised and often marginalized shepherds. Being a shepherd warranted no fame or glory. Mostly, the vocation largely garnered public ridicule and humiliation. Today it might be a candidate for Mike Rowe's program, *Dirtiest Jobs*.

So for Jesus to name himself the "Good Shepherd" would have shocked the gospel writer's earliest audiences. In effect, Jesus says that he will become the object of ridicule and scorn much as the common shepherds were - which, in reality, is pretty much what happened. As he often did in his ministry, Jesus took conventional wisdom and flipped it on its ear.

But here's another reversal. Sheep were used as sacrificial offerings in the Jewish Temple to restore one's relationship with God. So think about it: without the shepherds of Jesus' day, there would have been no sheep to sacrifice, and ultimately, no restoration of one's relationship with God.

But Jesus, in identifying himself as the good shepherd, says this: *I know my own and my own know me. . . . And I lay down my life for the sheep.*" This shepherd is not in the business of leading his sheep to slaughter but rather saving his sheep *from* slaughter. He does not allow them to die, but dies in their place.

So for Jesus, the relationship between shepherd and sheep is not an impersonal one. It is much more than that. For the good Shepherd, this is a life of commitment.

As we read in our epistle lesson today, *"We know love by this, that he [Jesus] laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees our brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?"*

A good shepherd knows his flock intimately and completely. He understands the particular needs and desires and "quirks" of the flock and each of the sheep within it. We all are part of God's flock, God's chosen ones. But with this valuable relationship comes a mission: to offer God's love in a world of conflict, to love one another as God has loved us, and to help our brothers and sisters in need.

"Little children," John writes, *"let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."* For John, love is more than an emotion, more even than words and speech. It is truth and action.

Now, truth be told, we may find it insulting to be called a sheep. But when Jesus describes the life of a shepherd, we get some insight into a sheep's life - which might change our mind about how we view being a sheep in God's eyes.

"My sheep hear my voice," Jesus says. *"I know them, and they follow me."* Jesus says not only is it acceptable for us to be sheep, but it is imperative that the sheep know the voice of their shepherd.

So, how well do we know Jesus? How well do we recognize God's voice, God's presence among us? The answer to those questions is probably different for every person sitting here today. Some of you, I know, know Jesus, know God very well. Others of you are just learning to know Jesus and to understand that sheep/shepherd relationship. For some, the relationship has been rocky at times, but you are trying to make it better. That's why you are here today. That's why we all are here today, I believe - to know Jesus, to know ourselves, and to know our fellow sheep just a little better.

Perhaps the larger, more important point to be made from today's lessons is not how well we know Jesus, but how well Jesus knows us. The relationship between shepherd and sheep is one of familiarity, which means that Jesus knows us fully and deeply. We are not a random combination of protein and water, taking up space on the planet with no meaning in life. We are people with a purpose, known intimately by the God who created us and by Jesus who offered his own life for us.

For the Good Shepherd, tending the sheep is a life of commitment. He will lay down his very life for the sheep. And he does this willingly. *"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."* Jesus chose to obey the will of his Father. Jesus freely chose to give his life, rather than having his life taken away from him.

And because of his love for us, the good shepherd also has a vision for our future. That vision is for us to be *"one flock."* There are sheep who do not belong to his fold yet. And like the Parable of the Lost Sheep, this shepherd desires to bring all sheep together. Sometimes I think we do everything we can to keep that from happening, but it is God's desire nonetheless.

Like real sheep, we may feel dim-witted, bumbling, and prone to wandering. But Jesus our shepherd knows us intimately, and Psalm 23 reminds us of the command he gave to his disciples and gives to us all: "*Follow me.*" AMEN