

May 6, 2018

“I AM the...”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 10:7-11; 27-30

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One thing I find interesting is that we have a variety of cultural fascinations in this country. Like the Mafia, the Royal Family, CIA/FBI intrigue, and even the Wild West and its "cowboys." I mean, just think of all the cowboy movies, television shows, actors depicting cowboys... John Wayne, *High Noon*, *The Lone Ranger*, Matt Dillon, *Lonesome Dove*, the Marlboro Man, Gene Autry, *Shootout at the OK Corral*, *True Grit*, etc. Yes, we rank “cowboys” among the heroes of our country. One the other hand, in today's scripture reading, we hear about a shepherd. And let me ask, how many movies about shepherds have you seen recently? It brings to mind a wonderful comparison by author Max Lucado about cowboys and their cows, to shepherds and their sheep. Let me read it for you.

"Behold the hero of the American West. The cowboy. Behold the hero of the Bible. The shepherd. On the surface he appears similar to the cowboy. He, too, is rugged. He sleeps where the jackals howl and works where the wolves prowl. Never off duty. Always alert. Like the cowboy, he makes his roof the stars and the pasture his home. But that is where the similarities end. You see, the shepherd loves his sheep. It's not that the cowboy doesn't appreciate his cow, it's just that he doesn't KNOW the animal. He doesn't even want to. Have you ever seen a picture of a cowboy carrying a cow around his neck? No. Have you ever seen a shepherd carrying a sheep around his neck? Of course! Why the difference? Simple. The cowboy leads the cow to slaughter. The shepherd leads the sheep to be shorn. The cowboy wants the meat from the cow. The shepherd wants only the wool of the sheep. And so they treat the animals differently. The cowboy drives the cattle. The shepherd leads the sheep. A herd of cattle has a dozen cowboys. A flock of sheep has one shepherd. The cowboy wrestles, brands, herds, and ropes. The shepherd leads, guides, feeds, and anoints. The cowboy knows the names of all the trail hands. The shepherd knows the names of all the sheep. The cowboy whoops and hollers at the cows. The shepherd calls each sheep by name. Now aren't you glad Christ didn't call himself the Good Cowboy.

Chapter Ten of St. John's Gospel is one of the most famous in the Bible because Jesus identifies himself in two ways. He says, “I am the Good Shepherd,” and also, “I am the door.” Now for Christians, the image of Jesus as a shepherd is well known, and it evokes some beautiful feelings inside us, doesn't it? And what better image than the 23rd Psalm. Let's read it together on the screen.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
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 runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

That truly is comforting, don't you agree? It reminds me of a beautiful story I once heard about an elderly man who was close to dying, walking in the shadow of death, so to speak, and his pastor went to visit him. When the pastor got to the man's house and walked into the bedroom, he noticed that a chair had been pulled up close beside the bed. So the pastor said to the man, "I see I'm not the first visitor you've had today." The dying man just smiled weakly, shook his head and explained that he had always taken comfort in the 23rd Psalm, especially the words, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me." So he asked his daughter to place a chair beside his bed so he could imagine Jesus just sitting there with him, talking with him, comforting him, next to him, all day long. Well the pastor prayed with the man and, of course, read the 23rd Psalm, and then left. A few days later he got a call from the distraught daughter who told the pastor that her father had passed away. She had checked on him early that morning, and gave him a kiss, propped his head up with a pillow and folded his arms across his lap. He closed his eyes and she left for just a little while to run some errands. She sobbed, "I was only away just a short time but when I returned he was gone. There was no change in him, he looked exactly the same as when I left... except that his hand was on the chair next to his bed." Yes, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, in living and in dying. And we are his sheep, and he loves us – loves you and me. He cares for us, giving us all we need, leading us down the right path, sustaining us no matter what happens. And so, we shall not fear. What a powerful promise that is for us!

Now let's consider the point Jesus was making when he said, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me he will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." "I am the door!" Well, his point was clearly demonstrated to Sir George Adam Smith, a famous theologian and scholar who lived in the early 1900s. While touring the Middle East, he came upon a sheepfold like the type used in that region during Jesus' time – a stone enclosure with an opening. Since the shepherd was nearby, Sir George asked him, "Is that enclosure a pen for the sheep?" "Yes," the shepherd replied. "I see there's only one way in and out," Sir George said. "Yes, you're right, there's only one door," said the shepherd pointing to the opening. Sir George said to him, "But there's no door, no gate there, only an opening." And although the two were not talking about any Christian truth at that moment, Sir George was amazed when the shepherd said, "Oh, you don't understand, I am the door. I am the door," At that moment the great theologian's mind went to the tenth chapter of John, and he asked the shepherd, "What do you mean by calling yourself a door?" To which, the shepherd replied, quite naturally, "The sheep go inside the pen, and I lay my body down across the threshold, and no sheep is able to get out of the pen and stray off without me knowing. And no predator can get in with me there. When it comes time, I lead the sheep through the opening to pasture, or for water and then safely back." Sir George smiled inwardly to himself and thought of Jesus telling this parable some two thousand years previously and how everyone listening would easily understand. Isn't that a rich and meaningful illustration? "I am the door. The door to abundant life. Abundant life for you and me!" What a powerful promise that is for us as well!

But there's more to today's Scripture. What about those thieves and robbers Jesus mentioned that come after the sheep and threaten to steal and destroy. Now Jesus was referring to the Pharisees specifically, but I think there is a broader implication in his words. Because, think about the thieves and robbers in our lives that threaten to steal and destroy. Those things like fear – fear that robs us of joy, robs us of the pleasure of living each day to the fullest. Things like worry and anxiousness – that destroy our peace, takes away our peace of heart and peace of mind. Things like anger and resentment that destroy our patience, rob us of gentleness and even kill relationships. That's why Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice and listen to me." And just listen to his words to live by. He says in the Gospel of Luke – "Do not be afraid little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom. Fear not." He says "Do not worry about tomorrow, your heavenly Father knows what you need. Do not be anxious." He says, "Love others the way you want to be loved. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven. Show compassion." Yes, if we just "listen" to the voice of our shepherd, we will not be robbed of the joy or

peace or mercy or love, or any of Christ's promises that can make our life meaningful and abundant. We just have to listen to the words of our shepherd and follow him.

And finally, we also heard Jesus say today, "I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." You know, earlier I spoke of how cowboys are part of our American culture. But we here at John Wesley are a part of another culture. We are part of a distinct community called "the Body of Christ." And as this Body, we come to the table this Easter season – the Lord's table, to remember exactly how and why our shepherd did lay down his life for us. As we partake of the bread and the wine, assured of the love and abundant life he promised you and me, I want you to consider a divine twist. You see, one of the last things Jesus said that should have a profound bearing on us as we go out into the world as his disciples, was "Feed my sheep." Feed my sheep! God is like that – always caring for his flock. Amen.