

SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2010

Sunday, March 14, 2010: Jesus, the Good Shepherd

Jesus: The Good Shepherd
John 10: 11 – 21.

I. Introduction.

When I was a kid, I wanted to grow up and be just like my heroes. Now, it may come as a surprise to you...But, my heroes were not preachers. All I ever wanted to be was a fireman. I loved the TV show “Emergency,” and that is what I wanted to do. In fact, I even considered becoming a volunteer fireman in the small Mississippi town where I served as pastor for the first time.

Who were your heroes when you were a child? Sometimes, different individuals have different heroes. Sometimes, heroes can actually represent an entire culture or a generation.

For example, in England stories abound of the heroic knight in shining armor, fighting for everything that is noble and just...not to mention rescuing the damsel in distress. This is a cultural hero that doesn't relate well to children in the United States.

In Scandinavian countries, they dream about the Vikings...the little country no longer being taken advantage of by the bigger, more aggressive countries...the poor man finally getting what he deserves from the rich man. Again, this is a cultural hero...Not something you find in the United States.

In America we are more likely to dream about cowboys. (At least, we dream about cowboys if we are not dreaming about firemen. Cowboys are rugged, hard-working, living outdoors, isolated...the cowboy captures our independent spirit, the American idealism.

In Hebrew culture it was the shepherd...one man leading and caring for the needs of one large flock of sheep...providing food and water in the desert...defending off wolves and lions and bears with nothing more than a slingshot, or even using his bare hands if necessary.

There are at least two shepherd-heroes in the Old Testament. In Exodus 3, God spoke to a shepherd named Moses. Moses was taking care of his father-in-law's sheep, when God called him to be the redeemer for God's people in Egypt. God used Moses' knowledge of sheep and shepherding to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery. Then, in 1 Samuel 16, God led Samuel to a young shepherd named David to become the second—and greatest—king of Israel. Again, God used David's knowledge of sheep and shepherding to lead the nation of Israel.

As Christians, we have adopted this Hebrew image. We want to be like the heroic shepherd. We describe Christian leadership as “shepherding.” In fact, the word “pastor” comes from the Latin word “shepherd.” A pastor is a shepherd-leader of God's people. But, think about what this implies about God's people... Moses started out as a shepherd. David started out as a shepherd. The pastor is a shepherd. What does that say about God's people? A shepherd is a leader of sheep.

From a biblical perspective, we can cite numerous explicit examples where God's people are referred to as sheep. For example, Psalm 23 begins, “The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” God himself is the Shepherd. We are his sheep. Then, in John 10 Jesus said, “I am the Good

Shepherd...”

On one hand, Jesus is claiming equality with God. This was obvious to any good Jew who knew Psalm 23. On the other hand, Jesus is describing himself as our ultimate leader...the Shepherd of God’s sheep.

Read John 10: 11 – 21.

II. Good Shepherd Is “True” Shepherd.

In verse 11 Jesus described himself as “The Good Shepherd.” This expression, “The Good Shepherd” includes 3 important words:

1. **“Shepherd”** . . .The one who provides for the needs of sheep.

Sheep are totally dependant on the shepherd for food, water & shelter. Sheep are helpless and defenseless animals that need someone to care for them and protect them from animals and thieves. By using this image for himself, Jesus is associating himself with a wealth of OT literature which illustrates the relationship between God & Israel as sheep to shepherd (i.e. Psalm 23).

This image also places Jesus in the tradition of David who got his start as King of Israel by working as a shepherd boy and Moses who learned leadership by tending sheep. It could also be a reference to the coming Messianic age in which God himself would be the Shepherd over his people.

2. **“Good”** . . .John’s use of term “Good” is probably close to “True.” In John 6, Jesus described himself as the “True Bread” that comes out of heaven. In John 8, Jesus described himself as the true Light of the World. In John 15, Jesus claimed to be the “True Vine.”

While it is true that Jesus is morally good and perfect. Jesus is the only good person who has ever lived. However, it is possible that this is not what Jesus intended by this claim. It is possible that he is referring to the ultimate expression of what a shepherd is supposed to look like.

As a good and true and perfect expression of shepherd, Jesus is opening himself up to comparison to all other shepherds. This is an unusual image for you and me. We don’t see sheep and shepherds on a daily basis. In fact, we have to go to the petting zoo to see sheep. But, Jesus’ audience saw sheep and shepherds every day.

If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then we can assume that there were bad shepherds. In fact, John 10: 21 makes a reference to the healing of a blind man. This is a story that took place in John 9. When Jesus healed the blind man, a controversy erupted. On one side of the controversy were Jesus and the healed man. On the other side were the religious leaders. These religious leaders thought of themselves as shepherds, but it seems that Jesus is comparing them to himself. And, they fall short...

3. **“The”** . . .This definite article makes a claim for uniqueness of Jesus.

Read John 10: 11 – 13...Notice that Jesus didn’t claim to be “A” Good Shepherd. Jesus possesses a unique quality that separates him from all other shepherds. He lays down his life for the sheep.

Hired hands see predators and run for their own lives. They are working for money, and no one wants to put their lives at risk for money.

A shepherd who owns his own flock will protect sheep by fighting off wolves, bears & lions that might attack. Remember the story of David as a boy, who fought and killed both a bear and a lion that attacked his sheep? David was a good shepherd, but he wasn't The Good Shepherd. In other words, A good shepherd will live for his sheep and will sometimes risk his own life for the sheep.

The Good Shepherd is different, because Jesus did not risk his life for his sheep. Jesus voluntarily laid down his life for sheep. Only Jesus had the power and authority to give his life. His life was NOT taken from him. It was freely given.

The hired hands live for themselves... Good shepherds live for their sheep and put their lives at risk... But The Good Shepherd actually died for his sheep.

Ordinarily, the death of the shepherd would have been a disaster. If shepherd died, sheep would be scattered with no one to provide for their needs. When The Good Shepherd died, he actually provided for the sheep's greatest need. This is the meaning of the Greek preposition "for." Jesus gave his life "on behalf of" his sheep or even "in place of" his sheep.

This is the story of the cross. On the cross, The Good Shepherd became the Lamb of God. He was not murdered. He did not die a tragic and untimely death. Jesus voluntarily laid down his life...Because this was the best thing for the sheep. Jesus laid down his life so that we could have true life.

III. Knowing Sheep Is Picture of Intimacy.

In vv. 14-15, Jesus introduces a new theme under the Shepherd motif. He speaks of the knowledge between sheep and shepherd.

When you and I read about Knowing, we read it differently than it was intended by both Jesus and John. We tend to think in categories similar to Greek understanding. Knowledge = seeing, empirical sensory data, logical. The Hebrew understanding of knowledge was completely different. To them, Knowledge = experience, relationship.

In other words, Jesus did not mean that sheep recognize shepherd when they see him. (That's the Greek or American view of knowledge.) Jesus meant that there was a kind of intimacy / shared experience / relationship between sheep & shepherd. This kind of relational knowledge is only possible by spending time together.

The shepherd & sheep spent all hours of every day together. This developed a familiarity between the two. Shepherd provided all food, water & shelter for sheep. This developed a sense of trust & dependence. Sheep totally depended on shepherd & trusted him for all their needs. This illustrates dependence, not independence.

IV. Responding to Shepherd's Voice.

At this time, we must return to Jesus' parable in vv. 1 - 6. Several flocks of sheep would spend the

night in the same fold.

During the night, the flocks would intermingle & not remain together in separate areas. Therefore, it would seem difficult to separate one flock from the others. In the morning, the shepherds would stand in diff areas outside the fold & begin to call their own sheep. The sheep would recognize their own shepherd by his voice and run to him. When strangers call to the sheep they will not follow b/c they do not recognize their voices. In fact, the sheep run away because they fear those they do not trust.

There are two ways we can interpret Jesus' words about hearing the voice of the shepherd. On one hand, it seems clear from the parable that only those who hear the shepherd's voice will be saved. On the other hand, Jesus tells us in verse 16 that he has other sheep outside of the sheep pen who will hear his voice. Therefore, I think we should also say that any who hear the shepherd's voice will be saved.

Jesus' sheep will not be confined to one national identity or even one racial heritage.

Only those who listen to Jesus' voice will be saved...

And, ANY who listen to Jesus' voice will be saved.

V. Conclusion.

When Jesus described himself as The Good Shepherd, he told us a lot about himself. He claimed to take on the role and identity of God for his followers. He not only claimed this for himself, but he demonstrated it by laying down his life for you and me. But, Jesus also told us something about ourselves. We are his sheep.

1. We are loved by the Shepherd...

Ancient shepherds had a special relationship with their sheep. They gave their sheep names and treated them more like pets than livestock. Jesus wants this same kind of relationship with you. Jesus did not lay down his life to impress you or to set an example for us to follow. Jesus lay down his life to demonstrate his love for you and to give you life.

You are valuable to Jesus. Jesus loves you. However, you are not loved because you are valuable. You are valuable, because Jesus loves you.

2. We belong to the Shepherd...

This is the primary difference between the shepherd who owns the sheep and the hired man who only works for money. The shepherd owns the sheep and loves them. The hired man is only working for money. Love is a stronger bond than money.

Think of a man who is in love with a woman. He will climb the highest mountain or cross the deepest sea to be with his love. Think of a parent who sits by the bedside of a sick child. Think of an adult child, who is the primary caregiver for their parent. No sacrifice is too great. They will never leave the child or the parent they love.

In the same way, The Good Shepherd will never abandon the sheep who belong to him. Physical illness, financial problems, relationship problems, sin... None of this can separate us from The Good Shepherd.

3. We must listen to the Shepherd...

Jesus said that ONLY the sheep who listen to his voice will be saved. Jesus said that ANY sheep who listen to his voice will be saved. Listening is important.

However, there is a difference between listening and hearing. Hearing can be done by accident. Listening is an intentional act of our will and attention.

God is still speaking to us today. The problem is that we often do not listen. God speaks through his word, the Bible. Yet, when our Bibles are closed, the voice of God is silenced. God speaks through his Holy Spirit. Yet, when we operate daily on our own strength, wisdom and experience, we silence the Holy Spirit.

4. We were created for community...

Throughout this passage, John has used the plural form of the Greek word “sheep.” However, we can’t see that in English, because in English “sheep” can be either singular or plural. That is interesting... Sheep are not usually found alone. Sheep are herd animals. There is no such thing as an individual sheep.

Isolation would be deadly for a sheep. Sheep are vulnerable animals. They have many natural predators and no natural defense system. This is why it is important for sheep to have a shepherd and to stay together in the flock. Sheep need the flock as much as they need the shepherd. The safest place for a sheep is to remain in the flock, close to the shepherd.

This is why you and I need the church. We were not created to be isolated Christians. No. Just as there is no such thing as an isolated sheep, there is no such thing as an isolated Christian. The safest place for you and me is in the church, close to the Good Shepherd.

A little girl was trying to quote Psalm 23 by memory. She said, “The LORD is my shepherd... .. That’s all I want.”