

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter Year C

[RCL] Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Today many churches will celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, especially those parishes and congregations that have “Good Shepherd” in their titles. “The Good Shepherd” is a title that Jesus used for himself in a famous section of the Gospel of John in which he declares, “I am the Good Shepherd.” The passage is so meaningful for the Christian understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth is that parts of it are appointed for this Sunday in all three years of the Church’s lectionary.

The background and implications of Jesus’ claim to be the Good Shepherd make it particularly consequential. Throughout the Old Testament—but with special pointedness in the prophetic books—the kings and other rulers of Israel and Judah are called shepherds. This designation makes sense because kings and rulers were entrusted with looking out for the welfare of God’s people. They were responsible for defending them from attack, for administering justice, for taking care of the poor and needy, and for making provisions for the worship of the Lord.

As the Hebrew prophets make clear, however, the rulers of Israel and Judah failed on every count. They “fed themselves and not the flock,” and they had “scattered the sheep of the Lord’s flock”. They proclaimed the hope that the Lord would intervene on behalf of the people, God would be their true Shepherd. God spoke to Ezekiel promising:

“I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.”

Throughout the Psalms the Lord is presented as the Shepherd of Israel and the one who guides the people like a flock. The best-known example of the Bible’s shepherd-imagery for God is the psalm appointed for today, Psalm 23. Many Christians know its words by heart:

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.
He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake.”

In rich symbolism, the psalm movingly depicts God as the true king of Israel and shepherd of God’s people. God gives them everything they need, and nothing is missing from God’s generous provisions. Sustenance, refreshment, beauty, and safety are all to be found among the Lord’s gifts for God’s people. The Lord’s strength defends them from their oppressors and saves them from dangers the way a shepherd protects their sheep from wolves, bears, and lions:

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

God's people rejoice, surrounded by the abundance of God's love forever:

“Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

This understanding of God as the Shepherd of Israel forms the backdrop for Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of John.

Jesus begins what is known as the Good Shepherd discourse by describing the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd: God knows them by name, and they recognize God's voice. The relationship is direct and personal. God is not some far-off deity who is uninterested in God's people. God loves them and calls them by name.

Like the Old Testament prophets Jesus contrasts the Lord's care for people with the failure of the Jewish leaders who came before him. He exposes them as false shepherds. Instead of caring for the flock of God they were thieves and robbers from whom the sheep needed protection. Jesus insists that the false shepherds only came “to kill, to rob, and to destroy” but that he came to save the sheep and to give them “abundant life”. Jesus teaches that as Israel's true Shepherd, the long-awaited Messiah, he knows us, loves us, and provides for us with the same knowledge, love, and care that God, Israel's Lord, offers to God's people. He even promises us the gift of eternal life.

By laying claim to the role of the Good Shepherd, Jesus is claiming for himself a position reserved for God alone as becomes evident from the section of the Gospel we hear in today's readings. The crowd demands that Jesus answer them clearly whether or not he is the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus further angers them by telling them that they really ought to have discovered that for themselves when they had heard him teaching and when he had done mighty signs before their eyes, but they had not listened or seen because they were not God's sheep. He appears to rile them even more by pressing the question further. He declares, “The Father and I are one.” It was a remarkable statement, and it provoked a dramatic response—the crowd took stones in order to kill Jesus!

There appeared to be no two ways about it: Either Jesus was correct, and he was the Good Shepherd being opposed by some outsider sheep, or he was a blasphemer who deserved the harshest punishment. The crowd's violent reaction further illustrates the importance of the question that faces every person: Who is this Jesus? Is he a blasphemer, or is he who he says he is? Is this Jesus the Christ? Is he the Good Shepherd?

In his book *Mere Christianity*, Anglican layman and theologian C.S. Lewis suggested that one might ask if perhaps Jesus was simply a lunatic, but that no one who listened to Jesus' message about the care and the loving protection of God could seriously argue that Jesus was a madman. Therefore, instead of simply dismissing what Jesus says, we must take his claims seriously.

Many who first heard Jesus' claims to be one with God demanded evidence, signs that would demonstrate the truth of what he said. They wanted proof. Jesus gave them an answer when declared, “I am the Good Shepherd; I know my own, and my own know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep... No one takes it from me; but I lay it down of my own accord, and I have

power to take it up again.” The proof that Jesus gives that he is the Good Shepherd is his loving self-sacrifice for the people of God and the power of his resurrection. Put another way, Good Friday and Easter Morning are the proof that Jesus of Nazareth is who he says he is.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we ought to celebrate God’s great love as it is revealed in Jesus Christ’s total gift of himself on our behalf. He is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep and took it up again, and it is he who has given us the abundance of eternal life. As Christians we receive this gift as we hear Jesus’ voice calling us each by name and as we trust him with our whole life in the knowledge that commended to the Savior’s keeping we shall never ripped away from God’s love. Amen.

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