

“The One Good Shepherd and the One Unusual Flock”

John 10:1-6, 11-16; Jeremiah 23:1-4; Psalm 23

October 26, 2025/St. Andrew's Sunday

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I. Text

We continue our sermon series on the great “I AM” sayings in John. And today we are back in John 10. In John 10 we get the only parable in John. Really it's 2 parables “mashed” together. Last Sunday we discussed “I AM the Sheep Gate.” Today it's “I AM the Good Shepherd.” I'll read the parable again, and then Jesus' explanation of the Good Shepherd. Listen for echoes of Psalm 23 and Jeremiah 23.

Read John 10:1-6, 11-16.

II. Introduction

Shepherds? What do you picture when you hear the word “shepherd?” Green fields. A shepherd's crook? The 23rd Psalm. Kids in costumes for a Christmas Eve play?

Shepherds. Here's what a shepherd in Jesus' day might have said.

(1st person monologue. Hold shepherd's crook.)

“A good shepherd? I try to be a good shepherd. Let me tell you though, this would not be my first choice. But you have to put food on the table. And my family has had a flock of sheep for generations. It's a family business. So I was chosen, directed, volunteered for this job and way of life. Sometimes it seems like I got the “short end of the crook.”

“And understand, it is a way of life. It can be lonely, so you have to be comfortable by yourself. I'm away from my family often for days, and sometimes longer. And of course, you're outside, on hills and mountains, in pastures, skirting deserts, in the heat and cold, the sun and rain. And it's a dirty job, outside and with the sheep all day. I can read some words. But not enough to read God's law. And I'm busy all day, so how could I study it anyway? The Pharisees and rabbis hire shepherds to tend their flocks. But they don't call us friends. Rather they whisper “Unclean” behind our backs.

“A good shepherd? I don't know. I suppose a good shepherd keeps the flock together, leads them to clean water and good pastures, looks for the lost, and knows the sheep. That's the crazy thing, you really do get to know them. And they get to know you. When my flock is watering with other flocks all I have to do is call them, and they follow me, leaving the other sheep. They'll ignore or run from someone else. But they know me and my voice.

“A good shepherd? It’s also about protection. There are thieves, packs of dogs and wolves. Shepherds know the test will come when you have to stand up, or run. And courage can have a cost. I have friends who have been crippled, or lost, defending their flocks.

“A shepherd...we hear stories of a different day when Jacob and Moses and David were shepherds. Shepherds were respected then. But that was long ago. It was a different time. Today my family counts on me. I try to be a good shepherd.” (Put crook down.)

So if the view of shepherding in Jesus’ day was not really the romantic vision we may have, why does Jesus use this image in this “I AM” statement? There may be at least two reasons.

First, Jesus is drawing on a deep well of Old Testament theology and story. Hundreds of years earlier when Israel was more a shepherding culture, the image of shepherd was more familiar, honored, and part of everyday life. So it was used to describe God’s care. And it was to illustrate the good care expected of religious and political leaders. And in time it came to express the hope of God’s coming, like a good shepherd cares for sheep. So when Jesus mentions “the good shepherd,” he’s calling on this long theological history and story of God and Israel.

Second, I think Jesus is also talking the language of people on the margins. Shepherds were part of the working class, blue collar, the 99% and not the religious and the upper crust. When he speaks of “the good shepherd,” he’s using an image working people know, people who often feel on the edges of religious life. To a people who aren’t sure if they are welcome in God’s promise and presence, the language of “the good shepherd” includes them and maybe surprises them.

III. Brief Exegesis

Shepherding; Jesus is drawing on the familiar words of the 23rd Psalm. It is a Psalm of trust. And it was sung and prayed and read and studied in ancient Israel. It is a Psalm that announces the goodness of God’s care. God is neither an absent landlord nor a demanding taskmaster. Rather, God is like a good shepherd. God is actively present in the lives of God’s people. Like a good shepherd, God gives his people rest and peace. God leads God’s people to green pastures. God leads them to cool waters. It’s daily care. God the good shepherd doesn’t get lost, but leads God’s people in right and good ways of life.

And when the dark valleys come, and they do come, God does not abandon his people. Rather like a good shepherd God is there protecting them, encouraging them, helping them, comforting them. We need not fear evil. God is a good shepherd like that.

And in the rhythm, sound, and images of Psalm 23 we get the feeling of all that. We need not know much about shepherding to trust the promise of God the good shepherd in the Psalm. That’s why it’s so well known and often voiced softly when it is read aloud. It is a source of peace and comfort when life goes sideways. Jesus had Psalm 23 in mind when he said “I AM the Good Shepherd.”

And Jesus had Jeremiah 23 in mind. In the text the 7th and 6th C BCE prophet announces God's word of judgement against the religious and political leaders of ancient Israel. Those leaders were to model the good shepherding of God. But instead they have scattered and abandoned the people. Rather than care for the sheep, they have cared more for themselves. Rather than lead in the ways of life, they have led in the ways of death.

So God's judgment is coming. The religious and political leaders have failed so they will fall. They have not represented God and the care of God so they are done.

And then there's the surprise, the hope. God the good shepherd is coming himself. The days of the weak and failed shepherds are over. Rather it's the long-awaited time for God coming to shepherd. And God will gather the scattered, care for the forgotten, bring new life to the struggling, and give hope to the fearful. It is the promise of God's Messiah, the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd? When O God, when? Jesus gives the answer: "I AM the Good Shepherd." The answer is now. Jesus is the Good Shepherd in whom we can trust. He is the incarnation of Psalm 23. And he is God's Good Shepherd who has come to judge the failed shepherds and gather the lost sheep. "I AM the Good Shepherd. It is the promise of the 23rd Psalm and the hope of Jeremiah 23.

"I AM the Good Shepherd." And the Good Shepherd Jesus knows the sheep. And he especially knows those who feel lost and forgotten, the outsiders who wonder about God and grace and life from the edge. The sheep of the Good Shepherd's flock are not the small group of similar people you might expect. Rather the Good Shepherd gathers different sheep from different places, different ways of life, different languages, different cultures and races, the religious and those who wonder if God really cares for them, those who know God and those who hope God knows them. It's one unusual flock gathered by the one Good Shepherd.

IV. Theological Reflection

In the mouth of Jesus the declaration "I AM the Good Shepherd" carries all the hope of Psalm 23. It's the word to those who feel forgotten and lost, broken and confused; now is the time. "The Lord is my Good Shepherd." God's love and God's salvation is for me, for you, for us.

"I AM the Good Shepherd." It is also the promise of Jeremiah 23 fulfilled. The bad shepherds are "called out" by Jesus. They stand judged by the Good Shepherd. And rather than scatter the flock, the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. And in that they will know God, salvation, and be one flock.

The work of the Good Shepherd continued in the mission of the early Church. Women had places of equality. Gentiles were welcomed as part of the flock. People with different skin colors, from different cultures, who once believed in different gods, were invited to faith in the Good Shepherd. Christianity cut across the boundaries of socio-economics, education, and race.

People with special needs were given a place. People with broken lives were given hope and love.

And if the truth be told, it was often a mess at times. Often the work of the Good Shepherd moved forward amidst bad church fights, bad theology, bad ethics, bad decisions, and bad church splits. The work and word of the Good Shepherd is amazing.

It seems at times we're living amidst a mess today. Cultural change and the erosion of Christian faith in Western culture have resulted in church decline, anxiety, grief, and "finger pointing." And the political and moral divisions today have found their way into many churches. There's no shortage today of churches splitting or leaving a denomination, winning or losing, for this or against that, more faithful or less faithful. When I came into the Shenango Presbytery 35 years ago there were 68 churches. Today there are about 40. And in a few years, certainly less.

I sometimes get frustrated and exhausted with talk about more faithful, more biblical, more Christian. There is no purer church or denomination out there somewhere. That's the great Protestant, and Presbyterian heresy; to believe that by separating ourselves from each other we somehow create a purer, more faithful church. Nonsense.

Rather it's the one Good Shepherd with the one unusual flock. And by the gracious gift of belief and baptism, we become part of that unusual flock. Even with people who are different than ourselves and who may be wrong, or right, about different things, conservative, or liberal.

It's hard work being the Church. We'd rather gather with sheep like ourselves and believe we are the true flock, than do the harder work of patience, forgiveness, hope, and love with different sheep. I have been glad for 25 years to be here with you at 1st Church as we struggle to figure out what it means to be part of the One Good Shepherd's one unusual flock in the Shenango Valley. It's our witness to the Good Shepherd in our Presbytery and in our community.

"I AM the Good Shepherd." It's an invitation to belief. Belief is what we confess. And belief is also how we live...together, with the Good Shepherd.