

"I Know My Own, and My Own Know Me"

John 10:1-21

Pastor Stephen Ridge

This morning we resume in John's gospel, still in the Fall before Jesus died, still in Jerusalem only days after a mob on the temple porch had tried to corner Jesus and stone him because Jesus claimed to have seen the patriarch Abraham, a man who lived and died many, many centuries before Jesus was born. To their ears, it was blasphemy for a Galilean carpenter to throw around names like Abraham and they might have killed him, if he'd not slipped off into some odd street corner where he found and healed a beggar who had been blind from the day he was born. So now the authorities had yet another miracle to explain.

So the rabbi's, unable to apprehend and charge Jesus, blundered through a heavy handed trial where this poor beggar gets thrown out of synagogue because he wouldn't speak against the stranger who had given him his sight. Quite a roller coaster day for our beggar! Jesus found him later, after the trial and all the hoopla, and taught the man who it was who'd healed him, and the man simply took Jesus at his word, prompting Jesus to say this: *"It was for judgment that I came into this world, that those who do not see might see, and those who see might become blind."* In other words, there's eyesight and then there's getting it.

How God's people back then needed leaders who would get it when a Savior came calling! So Jesus told a parable about leadership, he said: *"Truly, truly I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in some other way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep."* Now the Israelites understood this. They were a shepherding nation from way back. A real shepherd didn't need to sneak into any sheepfolds. Just walk in the usual way, and make the usual sounds, and his own sheep would know exactly who he was.

It was so obvious that people didn't know what Jesus meant. Of course, a shepherd enters a sheepfold by the gate, so... what? So, Jesus went on, and here it got interesting: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and go in and out and find pasture."* So you know who a real leader is, spiritually speaking, by where he or she stands with with Jesus. Because the sheepfold is his, the sheep are his. It is by knowing Jesus himself that a shepherd belongs in the sheepfold, and understands the sheep.

This statement of Jesus, *"All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep didn't listen to them,"* has gotten the commentators writing thick and fast. And the concern is that no one should think Jesus is disowning the *"all"* or even any of the Old Testament prophets and heroes. Moses and David and Elijah and so on are not at all the *"thieves and robbers"* Jesus has in view here. The *"thieves and robbers"* who *"came before"* him are the old men of Jesus' generation who were so bent on being fine the way they were that the very notion of a Savior with whom they had to deal to belong in the sheepfold was bitterly offensive.

So by standing between Jesus and the people he sought to reach, by demanding submission and allegiance and tithes and offerings from God's people for what had become a system that exalted and empowered and enriched them, the leaders of Jesus' day had become thieves and robbers, taking what belonged to God and using it to promote the delusion that people could win God over by the mastery of kosher custom and practice. Today in the media, there's a new, different menu of techniques and disciplines to win over God. But the idea that God can be obligated to save us or use us is deadly to any real personal faith in Christ.

Where false teachers offer us a way of life that leads to mastery, and fulfillment and success, Jesus offers us himself. So Jesus warned: *"The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."* What Jesus promises is that we can trust him because he has placed our well being over and above his own. *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* It follows that old Israel's leaders suffer in comparison to Jesus.

Jesus describes them: *"He who is a hired hand, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."* A month ago, Carl Mende taught us well about the dynamic that existed between Ancient Near Eastern shepherds and their sheep. They were not sheep drivers like we are today, they were more in the nature of sheep whisperers. Just like in the Twenty Third Psalm, ancient shepherds established a pattern, a stable history of getting the flock to water and pasture and shelter and safety to the point that each flock just followed after the sight and sound and scent of their own shepherd.

"I am the good shepherd." Jesus said, *"I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father..."* It's a funny thing about the Twenty Third Psalm, *"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..."* Christians usually imagine that the psalm was written for us to sing to Jesus, our Good Shepherd, and certainly no harm will come to us if we sing it to him. But the biblical fact is that the psalm was originally written for Jesus to sing to his Father. It was Jesus who was fed and watered and restored by his Father. Jesus had enemies at his table. Jesus was anointed with oil to be king and so on.

The point being that to be a good shepherd, humanly speaking, you need to follow a Shepherd yourself. Listen more carefully to what Jesus said, *"I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep."* In other words, Jesus went to the cross for us because his Shepherd, the Father, led him there. His Shepherd taught him that the cross is what it would take to get his flock safely to the fold by the end of the age. *"This charge I received from my Father,"* Jesus told us. He went to the cross because he loved and trusted his Father.

And the feeling was mutual. Jesus said, *"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again..."*. Of course, Jesus, the eternally begotten from the Father, is a special case. His Father shepherded him *"through the valley of the shadows of death"* because Jesus' mission was to be a pathbreaker for us. And his obedience, his faithfulness to his Shepherd qualifies him to be our Shepherd through the shadows we'll have to face, the crosses we'll have to bear.

So Jesus interrupts this intense meditation with an odd thought, he says, *"...I have other sheep who are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one Shepherd."* Guess who's in that other flock that Jesus had in mind in the months before he lay down his life. It's you and me, all those believers from everywhere who did not belong to old Israel, who were not part of the original flock God gathered as his chosen people. Before we were ever born, before any of our ancestors knew anything about Christ, Jesus knew we would come and he knew he was dying for us.

It was his mission. Leadership requires learning, experience, discipline, commitment, compassion, so many things. But the first question we should ask about anyone who wants to lead in God's kingdom is whether he or she is willing to follow. Is there a Shepherd to whom this person answers, are there rules this person will observe, is there a duty this person will perform to his own hurt, at his own cost? Hired hands serve to gain something, to become something for themselves. Real shepherds love and trust the Good Shepherd enough to lay all that down and serve.

Mid-Week Devotional **Shepherd, Lamb, and King** *Psalm 23; John 10:14-21*

One of the features of the psalms of David is that often David's identity as the king and savior of his own people in his own day look forward to what Jesus would be in his own turn a thousand years later. And the Twenty Third Psalm is one of the more complicated and involved instances of David singing both about himself in real time, and about Jesus, who would fulfill David's mission a thousand years after him. The word "christ" means anointed and David was anointed by Samuel to be Israel's savior and king in an era when no other man had been able to lead and save Israel. But David opened the Twenty Third Psalm not claiming to be a shepherd at all!

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want," David sang. Which was strange because if Israel ever had a shepherd, David was it! He had been a shepherd by trade before God called him as a king. David had faced and conquered every enemy in sight, extending the boundaries of Israel out to the boundaries Moses had set for Eden way back in Genesis. Even with all his sins, fallen though he was, David led Israel with a sort of strength and honesty and compassion that would only be surpassed by Jesus.

And yet what David sings here is that Israel's shepherd needed a Shepherd. *"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,"* David sings. The point being that rulers and saviors in a kingdom set by God must first need God, and belong to God. And David knew the score. The first, necessary, essential ingredient to human leadership is to know that we are small, vulnerable pictures of what it is like to be God.

None of us is complete, none of us is capable to lead unless we are willing to let God be shepherd and let him take care of us. Because God's leading us and his taking care of us go hand in hand. *"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me aside still waters. He restores my soul."* The restoring David sings about here is perhaps not so much about us being healed and refreshed as it is about our being brought back into the fold. He *"restores"* us in the sense that he brings us home when we get lost.

"He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." In other words, shepherds don't just nurture and feed and protect their sheep, they navigate for them. To be a sheep, to belong to a flock, is to follow where the Shepherd leads, to trust the Shepherd to get us to the right place. So, as a practical matter, what David sings is that God's people were being led by a man who himself was being led by God. And what was true for David was also true for Christ. What did John the Baptist say about Jesus? *"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!"*

In other words, Jesus' whole life was like ours, Jesus was a lamb, a sheep in his Father's care. So when Christ commands us to love and trust and follow him, he's only asking of us what he did with his own Father. The Lord was his Shepherd, who led him to do what was right and hard so that we could be forgiven and saved and follow Christ as our Shepherd in our own turn. Christ can lead us through *"the valley of the shadows,"* because his Father led him there and through to the other side.