

Fourth Sunday of Easter; Good Shepherd Sunday; April 21, 2024

+ John 10:11-18 +

“Our Good Shepherd Leads Us”

**“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired man, who is not a shepherd, does not own the sheep. He sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. Because he works for money, he does not care about the sheep.**

**“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me (just as the Father knows me and I know the Father). And I lay down my life for the sheep. I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd. This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it up again. This is the commission I received from my Father.”**

When the Greeks looked at animals, they tried to give them names that fit. For example, when they looked hippopotamuses, the hippos looked like giant horses in the river. So they named them “river horses” which is what “hippopotamus” literally means: “river horse.” When Greeks looked at sheep, they gave them a name that literally translates “things that move forward.” That was the most outstanding characteristic of sheep: they move forward.

And it’s true. Sheep are not flashy, they are not fierce, they are not fascinating. About all they know how to do is walk ahead. And unless they’re sleeping, that’s what you’re likely to find them doing. They don’t like to lie down. They don’t like to stand still. And because they’re so skittish, the slightest sound will send them scampering.

Moving forward is fine. But here’s the problem: sheep move forward without fangs or fleet feet to fend for themselves. They move forward without the ability to find water and food for themselves. And they will even move forward directly into thickets and ravines that they can’t get out of.

What do you need if you’re silly enough to keep moving forward without defense, food, or direction? You need someone to lead you, and to lead you well. You need a good shepherd to lead you. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd twice in today’s Gospel, and we see him lead us, again and again.

Did you know that Jesus is talking about you when he says, **“I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”** You and I were not part of the first flock that Jesus came to shepherd. In fact, we were born as sheep with no shepherd, and sheep without shepherds are dead meat. They are doomed to starve and thirst to death, if they live long enough without being torn apart by predators or wandering into death traps. We had no love of God to feed us, no forgiveness of sins to quench our thirst. We were in the devil’s jaws, headed to his lair to be torn apart. We were wandering from sin to sin with no way out.

And then Jesus spoke to us, and we heard his voice. We heard him say, **“And I lay down my life for the sheep.”** Jesus called to us in love with the good news that he, the Good Shepherd, has laid down his life for us. He laid down his life to rescue us from the devil’s grip, from the eternal destruction that we were headed for, from the eternal death our sins deserved. He called to us, **“I am the Good Shepherd.”** He made us the sheep who follow him, who listen to his voice, who love him as he loves us. He called to us

in love and joined us to countless flock of his Holy Church: **“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd.”**

And now we sheep are still moving forward, but no longer in the devil’s grip, no longer from sin to sin, no longer toward hell. Now we move ahead every day under the tender care of our Good Shepherd. He tells us every day in his Word, in his Supper, in the remembrance of baptism: **“The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”** He has made us sheep that love him, that want to follow him as we move forward, who follow him because he loves us. As we move forward, we follow him because his love is enough to die for us of his own free will, and his power is enough to live again to lead us: **“No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.”** The Good Shepherd who laid down his life to rescue us from eternal destruction rose again to lead us every day. He does it all because he loves us, and because he loves the Father who gave him this task: **“This is the commission I received from my Father.”**

Because Jesus loves his sheep perfectly, he knows them perfectly: **“I know my sheep.”** As people spend more and more time alone from other people, they more and more easily feel that no one knows them, no one truly understands them. And even those we love sometimes feel like strangers. I remember visiting an elderly homebound couple who had been married nearly sixty-five years. Old age and memory loss may have been mostly to blame, but occasionally one would turn to the other and say, “How could you say such a thing?” Even someone they had known for seven decades occasionally seemed not to know them. But Jesus knows his sheep perfectly. He knows what frightens you. He knows what your hopes are for this life, even the hopes that hurt because they seem like they will never be fulfilled. He knows your joys, your humor, your sensitivities. He knows things about you that you do not even know yourself. He has your days numbered as you cannot. He has your future planned as you cannot. Most of all, he knows his own love for you better than you will ever be able to comprehend: while you may sometimes doubt his love for you and his knowledge of you, that love and knowledge remain, today and always, perfect.

And now who will we know and love, fellow sheep? And who will we follow as we move forward? **“I know my sheep and my sheep know me...I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”** The other lessons this morning warn of bad shepherd, false prophets who lie and kill and destroy. And in this Gospel, Jesus himself warns of the fake shepherd who loves money but not the sheep. Whom will we know and love? Whom will we listen to? Loving and knowing Jesus, listening to his Word, means rejecting all voices that speak against him, and hating all messages that contradict him. We know him who knows us perfectly. We listen to the one whose voice leads us with perfect love.

But any spiritually honest and self-aware sheep will admit: I have listened to other voices that speak against my Shepherd’s. I have shown love for those who tell lies, because they say what my sinful ears want to hear, what my sinful heart wants to believe: that I need no shepherd, that I’m a strong sheep who can lead myself, that I can decide my path and determine what’s right for me! What sheepy silliness, to listen to such lethal lies! That we sheep could know better than our shepherd, find our own way, or save ourselves.

But good shepherds know that sheep wander, and know how to lead them back. I will give one example of the Good Shepherd doing that for one of his sheep. One of the sheep listening to Jesus’ words was St. Peter. On the night of Jesus’ arrest, Peter wandered badly. He did not listen to the voice of his Good Shepherd, who promises eternal protection, life even though we die. He listened instead to the lie that

he should preserve himself and deny any connection to Jesus. He did it three times. And the Good Shepherd turned to his wandering sheep, not away from him. He looked straight at Peter, calling him to repent. And that Good Shepherd, after he willingly laid down his life for that sheep and took it back up again, that living and forgiving Shepherd again turned to his sheep and brought him back into the fold with forgiveness.

We all sin like St. Peter. We all have listened to voices other than our Good Shepherd's and wandered from him. Whether it's the voice of false teaching from bad shepherds, or false belief proclaimed by our world, or the devil's lie that we need no shepherd and can lead ourselves, we have listened. And what does Jesus do? He turns to us to show us our sin and call us to repentance. In love he forgives and leads us back to the fold.

And what do we do now? Listen to him, and to him alone. Know him, and know him as well as he knows you. Love him, and love him as he loves you. Follow him, who laid down his life for you and picked it up again. Follow him, because you are a forward moving thing, and as you move forward through life every day, he will lead you into the green pastures and still waters of God's salvation, where you will find rest for your soul each day. Follow him as you move forward, until you reach your eternal home, and finally stop, to rest with him forever. Amen.