

April 22, 2018
John 10:11-18

Easter 4
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The Good Shepherd

The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. This image of the Good Shepherd is notably one of the most common and most endearing images that we hold of our Lord.

It's often one of the first images that we are introduced to as children, and it is probably the primary symbol that we look to, to understand our relationship with Jesus and His relationship with us. He is our shepherd, and we are his flock.

But it is also metaphor with many layers, many of which have become increasingly, not misunderstood, but uninformed by our present culture.

And as we move further and further away from our own agrarian roots, and away from the very Jewish context in which Jesus lived and taught, this becomes more apparent to us.

And so, it behooves us to spend some time re-examining this symbol.

About a year ago this time I was fortunate to have the opportunity to travel through much of Palestine and Israel, an experience that I am forever grateful for.

One of the places that I visited was the region of Beit Sahour, which is only a few kilometers from Bethlehem. But Beit Sahour is the place where tradition tells us the angel Gabriel visited the shepherds on the night in which Jesus was born.

We hear in the gospel of Luke tells that the Shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks by night (Luke 2:8).

It is a remarkable place with rolling hills, and beautiful gardens. And amid the gardens, are the ruins of a 4th or 5th century Christian monastery.

But there's also a large grotto in the area, a cave which has been transformed into a chapel.

And when you enter the cave there is a short wall that has been built up at the entrance and a narrow-gated doorway to pass through.

And when you step inside there is a dirt floor, and at one end of the cave there are rows of wooden pews and at the other end a simple stone altar.

And the cave is illuminated with dozens of candles, which when I first entered, I assumed must have been the cause for the thick layer of soot on the roof of the cave.

But the priest that was there, explained that while the candles had definitely contributed to the blackened ceiling and walls, the soot had been there for a much longer time before the cave had ever become a church.

Because from time immemorial, shepherds had been coming from the surrounding fields to use the caves as refuge at night.

So, I asked, did the shepherds sleep in the cave? The priest answered Yes. But not the good ones.

Shepherds he explained were rather low on the social hierarchy, and so the flocks that they tended were usually owned by someone else. The shepherds were usually hired-hands, and as hired-hands, most would have little interest in risking their lives to save the life of a single sheep.

Instead they would leave the sheep in the field and take for themselves the shelter and protection of the cave.

But a good shepherd he said, or the shepherd with a flock of his own, well they would use the cave as a sheepfold, and set themselves before the entrance of the cave as a gate, literally laying their own lives down, putting themselves between their flock and the wolves.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And so, when Jesus say that “I am the good shepherd, and that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, certainly we can look forward knowing that Jesus is making an illusion to his crucifixion.

But He is also revealing to us something about his relationship with us. He is not like one of the hired hands who abandons the flock when they need him most.

No Jesus is the shepherd who searches tirelessly for the lost, He leaves the 99 to find the 1. He calls to His sheep when we are scattered, and we know His voice because we’ve spent time in His arms. He carries us when we were too weak to make it on our own. And when the wolf is at the gate, He is the shepherd who has lays down his own life to ensure our salvation.

And He does this to keep His promise, that nothing in life or death will separate us from God’s love for us through Jesus Christ our shepherd and Lord.

Now we didn’t hear it in our reading today, but what’s interesting is that almost immediately after Jesus says to the Pharisees, I am the good shepherd, they attempt to stone Him to death.

And while their response may seem unprovoked to us, for the group of Pharisees, who knew the Torah and the writings of the prophets as well as they did, there was nothing Jesus could have said that was more blasphemous to their ears.

Now, in order for us to understand this most important layer of the good shepherd metaphor, this most radical aspect of His claim, we need to go back to the prophet Ezekiel.

Because throughout the Old Testament writings we learn that God would appoint judges, kings, and leaders over the Israelites, and these leaders were often referred to by God as the shepherds of His people.

But in most cases (Jer. 23:1-3, Zech 11:15) these shepherds were more likely to scatter the sheep under their care through greed and wickedness, than to actually feed and protect the flocks.

And so, in Ezekiel we hear God's response to this situation, to these bad shepherds, these hired hands who care more for their own well being than for the wellbeing of the sheep.

I want to read you some of Ezekiel 34, because it is really the foundational text for our gospel reading today from John.

"The word of the Lord came to me: ² Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them" (Ezk. 34:1-6).

"Now thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice" (Ezk. 34:12,13,16).

The prophet Ezekiel prophesies that God himself will be the good shepherd.

And so, as the Pharisee's sought to understand and to investigate who this miracle worker from Galilee is, they are confronted with this radical claim, that Jesus is the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophesy.

The evangelist John tells us that Jesus then spoke plainly to the Pharisee saying, "The Father and I are one, and so they took up stones to stone him" (John 10:30-31).

But for those who are being saved, for those of us who put our faith in Jesus; this is the good news.

That Jesus is the very presence of God, and He is the good shepherd. The shepherd who knows each of us by name, the one who binds us up and strengthens us along the way, the shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep.

Thanks Be to God.

Amen.