

The Good Shepherd

John 10:22-30

Crossroads Christian Church

Acts 9:36-43

April 17, 2016 Easter 4C

Here it is, election season, and lots of people are asking for our votes, so that they might be our shepherds. We try and sort among beliefs, political agendas, leadership styles, and trust, so that in November we might make good choices for president, senators and representatives on both state and national levels, governors, mayors, and other aspiring leaders. They want to be our shepherds, our leaders. Sometimes, we just hope not to get fleeced in the process. We're not sure we want to be sheep—we may think of them as not very bright, gullible, loyal to a fault, and we don't like to think of ourselves that way.

The idea of shepherd as a metaphor for leader goes way back in the Bible and world history. Moses was a shepherd in the desert of Midian when he came upon the burning bush, and God challenged him to lead the children of Abraham from slavery in Egypt to a promised land. Kings, priests, and rulers have called themselves shepherds for many, many centuries. Ancient statues of rulers and emperors sometimes show the rulers with a lamb across their shoulders. David was truly a shepherd king, a king who started his career as a shepherd, watching over and protecting his family's flock. Of course, we remember that he wrote the 23rd Psalm, which describes God as the ultimate good shepherd. Let's say it together.

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.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;

for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;

thou anointest my head with oil,
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life;

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for ever.

David, when he became king, was sometimes a good shepherd of the land and people of Israel, and sometimes not so good. He was a fearless leader, but sometimes made some bad decisions. After David came other kings, who didn't have David's depth of faith and love for God. Prophets would scold these false shepherds who led their sheep astray and even devoured them. Here's an example from the prophet Ezekiel. "The Lord's word came to me: Human one, prophesy against Israel's shepherds. ... Doom to Israel's shepherds who tended themselves! Shouldn't shepherds tend the flock? You drink the milk, you wear the wool, and you slaughter the fat animals, but you don't tend the flock. You don't strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, or seek out the lost; but instead you use force to rule them with injustice. ... So now shepherds, hear the Lord's word! ...As surely as I live, without a shepherd, my flock became prey. My flock became food for all the wild animals. My shepherds didn't seek out my flock. They tended themselves, but they didn't tend my flock. So, shepherds, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims: I'm against the shepherds! I will hold them accountable for my flock, and I will put an end to their tending the flock." (unquote) (Ezekiel 34:1-10 abridged) Then Ezekiel goes on to describe the Good Shepherd whom God would send to restore the people.

Other prophets said much the same thing, contrasting the bad shepherds, Israel's leader, with the Good Shepherd, God.

Then along came Jesus. In today's reading from the Gospel of John, we go back to an earlier time in Jesus' life. It is part of a much longer section, and it contains one of the "I am" passages that we've learned about before, "I am the good shepherd." This particular section of the story is set in Jerusalem, during winter, at the Feast of Hanukkah. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, after the Greeks and Syrians had desecrated it. Antiochus IV had tried to enforce Greek pagan religion and lifestyle upon the Jews. Under the leadership of the Maccabees, the Jews had managed to overthrow the Greek rulers, and the temple was once again used to worship Yahweh. But now, three centuries later, the Romans ruled. And people wondered. The lower classes wondered with hope. The ruling classes wondered with fear. Could Jesus be like the Maccabees, a Messiah who would lead them to freedom once more, this time against the Romans?

In this context, the anxious people said, "How long will you test our patience? Are you the Messiah? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." (10:24) This is a "Have you stopped beating your wife" kind of question in this context—whichever way he answers, Jesus would be in trouble with somebody.

Jesus answered that he had answered their question, but they hadn't believed. They were coming from two different connections, and not

meeting. Jesus said that the works that he had done—signs and miracles—testified to him. But they wouldn't understand because they weren't his own sheep. Jesus was protective of his followers—his sheep. They listen to his voice. "I know them, and they follow me," he says. He gives them eternal life. "They will never die," he says, and "no one will snatch them from my hand." What a promise! Then he goes back to his relationship with the Father, who backs up his promise, and says, "I and the Father are one."

Jesus is the good shepherd. He was willing to lay down his life for his flock, his disciples. He was willing to lay down his life for us, his followers.

Other people have served as good shepherds in our lives. Whose voice did you trust as a little child? Who watched over you and protected you? Thank God for them.

As you got older, and started getting out in the world, and started to make your own decisions, some good and some not so good, who was the wise and helping voice who helped you straighten things out, the caring person who got you out of trouble? Thank God for those people.

As you became something of a shepherd yourself, with a family to raise, or employees under you to guide, who did you turn to as mentors and guides and counselors? Give thanks for these people.

We have had many good shepherds in our lives, and we have had opportunities to be good shepherds. However, there is only one capital G Good Shepherd, God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

When we don't know which way to go, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

When we have tough decisions to make, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

When people you've trusted have let you down, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

When we fall into depression and discouragement, when our hearts break, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

When things get tough, when our plans crumble or our health fails, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

When we go down the wrong path, and feel ourselves estranged from other people and from God, when our lives are messed up with sin, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

When we don't know where to turn next, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

When we've come to the end of our rope, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

Whether in green pastures or the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd.

Jesus Christ will never forget you.

Jesus Christ will never abandon you.
Jesus Christ will never give up on you.
Jesus Christ will be there when you need him.
No one will snatch you from Jesus' hand.
Amen.