

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
October 17, 2021
John 10:11–18

Let us pray for the presence of God’s Spirit.

Open our hearts as we open your book today. Help these ancient words to be made new in our lives. May the Good Shepherd be real for us today. We trust you. Speak our names and we will follow where you lead. Amen.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. 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. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason, the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

This is one of the many “I am” statements that Jesus makes about himself. They are meant to describe who Jesus is. Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John that he is “The Bread of Life,” the “Light of the World,” the “Gate for the sheep,” the “Resurrection and the Life,” the “True

Vine,” the “Way, the Truth, and the Life,” and today’s reading where Jesus tells us he is the “Good Shepherd.”

These are remarkable statements and all of the “I Am” statements are an illusion to the story of Moses and the Burning Bush in Exodus, where God declares to Moses that God is the “I Am,” the holy name of God.

So, in today’s reading we hear Jesus declare himself as “The Good Shepherd.”

Good?

Frankly, it seems like the wrong adjective. Good.

Excellent? Outstanding? Amazing? These appear more appropriate for the Word made flesh than just “good.” Jesus should be better than good.

Good, it’s like the word “fine,” for me. It just doesn’t have enough, something. When Kelly was pregnant with our first child, I went to the first appointment where the doctor did an ultrasound, and she declared, “everything is fine.” What I heard was “everything is *fine*.” I told the doctor I needed to hear something more declarative, more exuberant; I wanted to hear, “everything looks fabulous,” or “everything looks great!”

But we get Jesus saying he is the good shepherd.

It makes me think, and it’s in the text, that because he is the Good Shepherd, there must be a bad shepherd – and indeed we hear of the hired hand in the text who does not care for the sheep as much because they are not his own. Good versus bad.

Dichotomies can sometimes be helpful, although often not in religious conversation. We are so found of pitting ourselves over against another group, arguing about who’s in and who’s out. Jesus tells us in the story, in fact, that there are other sheep that also belong to him. Maybe the

point isn't so much about who the sheep are and what pen they are in as much as it is about who the shepherd is.

Jesus is the good shepherd because he the source of abundant life. Before this story of sheep, Jesus heals a blind man. Jesus heals the blind man and gives him a new existence, a new life, he is a new creation, a child of God (1:1; 12–13). Jesus is the good shepherd because he *finds* the man born blind after the blind man has been thrown out (9:35) which the disciples need to hear because they too will be thrown out (12:42; 16:1–2) and which they need to remember because Jesus found them (1:43). Jesus is the good shepherd because he *knows* his sheep and he calls them by name. Jesus is the good shepherd because before he goes to the cross, he lays down his life by coming out of the garden, the fold, leaving his sheep protected and safe in the garden, giving himself up for the sake of his disciples, his sheep (18:4). Jesus is the good shepherd because he will take up his life again in the resurrection AND the ascension, the resurrection being our promise of life here and now and the promise of life in our future; the ascension being the abiding place that Jesus prepares for the ones he loves (1:18; 13:23; 14:2).

Jesus is Good because he is fierce about his job.

In fact, the job of shepherd was menial, and dangerous. Shepherds are dirty, smelly, and probably a little rough around the edges. They spend their time outdoors and amongst animals out in the fields. Their hands are rough, and their clothes worn. Shepherds are not polite society in nice clothing. Jesus cares for the sheep and is willing to be in the muck.

Jesus says that his sheep listen to him and that they know his voice. This knowing implies that Jesus is amongst the sheep. For one to know the sound of someone implies that there is a relationship there. Jesus is the true shepherd because he makes himself known and is known. And to know Jesus is to know God. To know God is to know Jesus and that is

the mark of the flock, to know and be known. This knowing is born of love – the love of God and Jesus – which in turn comes to us in the care of the shepherd.

As we look at resurrection, the image of the shepherd gives us our next attribute of resurrection.

Resurrection as protection. Resurrection as safety.

The shepherd carries the rod and the staff.

The staff nurtures, guides, and lifts up.

The rod beats back those that would do harm to the sheep.

Resurrection is safety. Jesus as Good Shepherd promises protection, that the valleys of death and depression and despair are not traveled alone. That the shepherd really does protect his sheep. No one will snatch you away. No one. No thing.

Safety is essential, on so many levels. Professional, personal, spiritual. With whom do you feel truly safe? Literally safe. And safe with your truth, who you are, who you want to be. Safe with your concerns and your grief and your sorrow. Safe with your celebrations and joys and dreams. Safe with your aspirations and hopes and accomplishments. Safe with your fears and your body and your mind. Safe with your thoughts and your concerns and your needs.

Resurrection is safety. But it is also safety from grief that could overwhelm hope; anguish that could crush the spirit; loneliness that might isolate the soul.

Resurrection is safety because the shepherd is totally committed to the well-being of the sheep.

I've been thinking a lot about safety and protection over these last several months.

Maybe that's why Jesus is the good shepherd and not the "awesome" shepherd, the "out-of-this-world" shepherd. Because at some point, we have to accept the fact that we are asked to be the shepherd as well. If we had to follow in "extraordinary" footsteps, we would find every excuse possible, every explanation imaginable, to decline Jesus' command.

Jesus asks Peter - "Simon Peter, do you love me?" When Peter says yes, Jesus tells him, "Tend my sheep. Feed my lambs. Shepherd my sheep."

This week I watched some of the footage that was released from police body cams during the protests following the murder of George Floyd. Where there is video of police talking about "hunting people." Where another video apparently shows an officer firing rubber bullets into a crowd of peaceful protestors and shouting "Gotcha" amidst laughter and before fist-bumping another officer.

I've been thinking about the 52 bills introduced in the Texas State legislature, just this year, that target transgender people, including the ability for families and doctors to make decisions for their families for life-saving care. Most of the bills in Texas have failed but this week in a special session one passed finally that bans children from participating in sports that align with their gender identity. Texas isn't the only state to pass bills like this.

I've been thinking about the black and brown, and transgender lambs of Jesus' flock, wondering where their care and protection is and what we, as shepherds, are going to do to make things better.

I've been thinking of safety as I watch footage of school board meetings break into fights. Or where school board members, principals, and

teachers are followed to their cars and threatened, or where they are assaulted on school property. I've been thinking about security and safety as I hear stories of healthcare workers, who are already under so much strain, being mistreated.

I think about safety as the re-entry team talks about the latest data, the appropriate protocols, the capacity of ICU's, the effectiveness and availability of vaccines, and our risk tolerance, as we measure what it means to keep one another safe and continue to be the church.

We think about what we hold most dear, what our values and our theology direct us to do. We think about best ways to move forward.

Our measure is the care and protection of the flock – all of the flock – particularly the most vulnerable.

This is why we will take things cautiously. This is why we move back and forth with some practices.

We are having and will continue to have these conversations... and we will communicate things as we know them... (open forum on Nov. 14)

But we know our values have always been about inclusion and care for all.

Resurrection is protection and safety. Not in the way that nothing will never harm us. We must also be part of tending the sheep. But resurrection as protection and safety that we are part of the flock that has a shepherd that is good. That is present. That is with us.

We are, indeed, sheep in Jesus' fold and that nothing, no one, no thing, nothing, can change that. Ever.

Amen.