

A Matter of Death and Life
John 10:11-21
West Valley Presbyterian Church, March 3, 2024

1. We've spent most of January and February in the desert with Moses and Israel, and studied both the bad decisions and the good decisions that they made while they went through a long period of transition. I hope we've all gotten the message, loud and clear, that when we're facing transition and are worried about the future, the thing to do is to bring our fear to God and trust him to lead us as a good shepherd would lead his sheep.
2. The Psalm that we read aloud this morning, Psalm 23, reminds us of how good life can be if we allow the Lord to be our good shepherd. He provides for us; he gives us rest; he is with us to comfort us; he anoints us. And we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
3. Now it's March, and we are in the season of Lent, where we focus on Jesus, and prepare ourselves to go through Holy Week: his last Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his last supper with his followers, his death, his burial, and his resurrection. Each of the 4 gospel writers has his own slant on the events of the week that changed the world. Last year we went through Matthew's account of the events of Holy Week. And this year, we'll be going through John's account of the events of Holy Week: Jesus' life, death and life. We'll begin by listening once again to what Jesus says about the good shepherd.

Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from the gospel of John, Chapter 10, vv 11-21:

SLIDES 1-7

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

¹⁹The Jews who heard these words were again divided. ²⁰Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?”

²¹But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

Here ends the reading of God's Holy Word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

4. You may have heard this passage before. It might be quite familiar to you. I wonder, though, if we've ever stopped to reflect on how very unusual Jesus' description of a good shepherd really is. Jesus says that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That never struck me as odd until I got to know some real shepherds.

5. When Rob and I lived in Tuolumne County, I made friends with a couple of women who raised sheep, in addition to chickens and vegetables. They certainly cared about their sheep. They had fences, and they had dogs who were trained to alert them if there were predators nearby. Which there often were. In Tuolumne County, there are mountain lions, bears, and coyotes who share their space with humans. When the dogs alerted the shepherds of threats to the sheep, my friends would first try to scare off the predators; and if that didn't work, they would shoot them. They wouldn't lay down their lives for their sheep. Why would they do that? It would be of no benefit to the sheep if the shepherds were killed – because then, who would take care of the sheep? They would die without their shepherd. And of course, the shepherd's family and friends would be devastated if she had died trying to take care of sheep. Her life is worth more than a sheep's life!

6. The shepherds of Jesus' day also tried to protect their sheep if they owned them. They did want to protect their investment. (The hired hand, as Jesus points out, wasn't invested in the sheep and often he did run away if a wolf showed up.) But though the shepherds tried to protect their sheep, they didn't let themselves be killed. Because, again, what would be the point of that? A dead shepherd makes the remaining sheep even more vulnerable than they were before. The shepherd's family is suddenly much more vulnerable than it was before. And presumably the shepherd himself doesn't wish to die prematurely. Everyone in Jesus' day knew all of that. Unlike those of us now, who live in cities, 2000 years later.

7. So why then does Jesus say that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep? When the people he was talking to knew perfectly well that shepherds generally didn't do that? Jesus describes this good shepherd in terms that his fellow Jews were very familiar with: Ezekiel 34:11-16. Ezekiel prophesied at a time when the people of Judah had gone into exile in Babylon, and were longing to return home to Judea. And this is part of what Ezekiel said:

SLIDES 8-11

“For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness....I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land....I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...”

8. So when Jesus says that he is the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep, and who also has the authority to take that life back up again, he's drawing from the description of God as a good shepherd. He's talking about what a divine shepherd would do – what God does. He says that he can, and he will, both lay down his life (die) and take it back up again (rise again). And what does that mean? It means that Jesus is both fully human (he can, and does, die) and fully God (he can, and does, rise from the dead.)

9. The people who were listening to Jesus understood that he was describing himself as doing what only God does, at the same time that he is also doing what ordinary humans do – namely, talking to other people. I'm not surprised that the people who heard Jesus speak 2000 years ago had a mixed reaction to him – with some of the people saying, "He's demon-possessed; he's nuts", and other saying, "No, he's not; he gave full eyesight to a man who was born blind! No demon can do that!"

10. But we here today do **not** have a mixed reaction to Jesus describing himself as the good shepherd, who both lays down his life and also takes it up again for the sake of the sheep. We here today are a part of Jesus' flock. We believe that Jesus is both fully human, as we can all understand; and that he is also fully God in a way that's beyond our understanding. We believe that Jesus freely chose to lay down his life for us, even to the point of dying a tortuous death on a cross, so that the power of sin over us could be broken. We believe that Jesus did break the power of sin and death, and rose again from the dead, so that we can live new lives for him. We belong to Jesus, and he protects us from the demonic force of evil that would claim us if it could. But it can't, because we belong to Jesus, together with all the rest of his sheep in every place and in every time. That's a mighty big flock that Jesus has!

11. We have lived long enough to know that life is not always easy. We've all experienced grief when someone we love passes on. We've all experienced suffering, when we've gotten sick or had surgery or were treated for cancer. We've all had to deal with problems at work. We've all argued with family members, we've all worried about our finances, we've all quarreled with friends at some point in our lives. But here's the good news, brothers and sisters: when the circumstances seem piled up against us, we can take heart. Because Jesus is right here with us, watching over us far better than any human shepherd could do, and driving away the demonic force that seeks to consume us. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus is right with us, and will lead us through to the other side. Brothers and sisters, we have nothing to fear; and we have every reason to praise and thank God for Jesus, forever and ever.

Will you join with me now in reading responsively from 1 Peter 2?

SLIDES 12-16

Concluding liturgy (based on 1 Peter 2:10,23-25)

Pastor: Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.

People: Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy.

Pastor: Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds we have been healed.

People: For we were like sheep going astray, but now we have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

All: Thanks be to God for our Good Shepherd!

[From the concluding liturgy, we will go straight into the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (communion prayer).]