

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

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Wednesday Lenten Series on I Am statements – in this case, I Am the Good Shepherd

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

A shepherd was herding his flocks in a remote pasture when suddenly a brand new Jeep Cherokee came towards him out cloud of a dust. The driver, a young man in a Brioni suit, Gucci shoes, Ray Ban sunglasses and a YSL tie, leans out of the window and asks: "If I can tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you GIVE me one?"

The shepherd looks at the capitalist, then at his peacefully grazing flock and answers, "Sure!" The yuppie parks the car, whips out his laptop, connects it to a cell phone, where he calls up a GPS navigation system, scans the area and opens a database and some 60 spreadsheets with complex formulas. Finally, he prints a report on a miniature printer, turns to our shepherd and says: "You have exactly 1586 sheep!"

"That's right," says the shepherd. "As agreed, you can take one of the sheep." He watches the young man make a selection and bundle it into his Cherokee.

As the car starts to pull away, the shepherd calls out: "If I can tell YOU exactly what your business is, will you give me my sheep back?"

"Okay, why not?" answers the young man, stopping the car.

"You're a consultant" says the shepherd.

"That's correct," he responds. "How did you guess?"

"Easy," answers the shepherd. "You turn up here without being asked. You want to be PAID for information I already have. And you don't know ANYTHING about my business, because you just took my DOG."

Well, WE don't know anything about shepherds either. And yet, except the cross itself, there is perhaps NO MORE enduring and powerful an image in our faith than the image of the good shepherd. And with the possible exception of John 3:16, the 23rd psalm is the most well-known passage in all of scripture.

I've often wondered about that. WHY? Why is this image so enduring? We in the 21st century are about as far from KNOWING anything, and honestly CARING anything, about sheep and shepherds as you can get. So why do we LOVE the 23rd Psalm and the IMAGE of the Good Shepherd so much?

What do you HEAR in the 23rd psalm? What are some words that describe the Good Shepherd to you?

(Ask the congregation. Possible answers: love, protection, security, guidance, comfort, strong, goodness, mercy.)

Maybe the imagery is outdated, but have we REALLY outgrown our need for someone to LOVE us FIERCELY and FOREVER, the way ONLY a TRULY good shepherd can? In our quiet and secret moments, we YEARN for someone STRONGER and WISER to take CARE of us. As Neal Plantinga once wrote, those of us who were raised in good homes carry AROUND with us the memory of how DELICIOUS it was to be tucked into our cozy beds at night without ANY worries to disturb our rest. Kids go to bed without FRETTING about their health or whether the bills can be paid. No, as children we wiggled drowsily in our beds awash in the knowledge that someone ELSE was in charge, and so we happily allowed ourselves to slip over the edge of slumber the way only a CHILD CAN, with literally NO cares to make our minds TOO busy to sleep.

We ADULTS carry that MEMORY in our sub-conscious, and we yearn for something like it again. In fact, we LONG for it even more deeply now, because NOW we know what it's like to live WITHOUT that security. NOW we know what it's like to watch a friend's, or our own livelihood be yanked out from underneath us. Now we know what it's like to wait for test results from the doctor. Now maybe we've gone through the PAIN of having to bid first grandparents and then parents and finally even friends a final goodbye. Now we KNOW that the wolf is at the door.

As strong and confident and independent and self-sufficient as we WANT to be, deep down we CRAVE SECURITY. We YEARN for someone to watch over us and protect us. We THIRST for someone to guide us to sweet pastures and lead us to still waters. And we FIND that in the Good Shepherd. We may not know the first thing ABOUT shepherds, but we find COMFORT in the knowledge that we have a "GOOD" one, indeed the BEST shepherd.

When the wolf comes and threatens us, and the shadow of death hangs over us, anyone ELSE would run away. All our idols crumble. Everything that promises security runs and hides. But not the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives his LIFE for the sheep.

A mother living in a tenement house was working at a nearby store. She'd left her baby with a sitter. While she was working, a fire engine raced by. She wondered, "Is the fire engine going to MY house?" FORGETTING about the store, she ran home. Her building had fire hoses aimed at it. It was burning like a matchbox.

Her eyes searched FRANTICALLY through the crowd of all the people from her building staring in shock at their homes going up in flames. Her babysitter HAD to be there SOMEWHERE. She just HAD to be. Then she saw her. The babysitter was sitting on a curb sobbing. But she was alone. Their eyes met and the babysitter wailed, "I'm sorry. I was so scared." Then she darted off into the crowd.

The mother felt her knees buckle. Then she saw the fire chief. Rushing to him, she cried out, "My baby's up there."

He shouted back to her, "It'd be SUICIDE for anyone to go up there NOW; it's too late."

A YOUNG fireman nearby overheard. "Chief," he said, "I have a baby at home too, and if my house were on fire, I'd want someone to go SAVE her. I'LL go."

The young fireman climbed the stairs; he got to the baby and threw her into the rescue net, and JUST as he did, the house collapsed and he was killed.

Twenty years later, a 20-year-old woman is sobbing softly at a graveside. Before her, at the HEAD of this grave, is the STATUE of a fireman. A man walking by asks respectfully, "Was that your father?"

She replies, "No."

"Was that your brother?"

"No," she says. "That's the man who DIED for me."

The Good Shepherd gives his LIFE for the sheep. And in this season of Lent, we're reminded that those aren't just HOLLOW words. Jesus wasn't only WILLING to lay down his life for his sheep; he DID lay down his life. He faced the wolf at the door and he felt the fangs as they pierced his hands. He DIED to save YOUR life.

But the man who died for YOU isn't IN the grave. He rose again to give you ETERNAL life. He rose again for this.

(Show the picture of Jesus embracing the lamb.)

He rose so he could hold you forever. In his arms, no wolf can touch us. You needn't fear anything.

My cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.

Let us pray. We are your sheep, O Lord, and you are our shepherd. When we stray, bring us back; when we falter, lift us up; when we struggle, carry us. Keep us ever mindful that we are yours, and you HOLD us in your arms, forever. Amen.