
KNOW YOUR SHEPHERD

Every year, the Fourth Sunday in Easter is GOOD SHEPHERD Sunday.

- In the verse that immediately follows today's discussion by JESUS of the work of the shepherd, HE tells HIS listeners, "I am the GOOD SHEPHERD."
- The name of GOD, "Yahweh" literally means "I AM" in Hebrew.
- Seven times in John's Gospel JESUS makes an "I AM" statement, and in doing so, identifies HIMSELF as GOD:
 - Today HE says, "I AM the gate."
 - As I said, right after this HE says, "I AM the GOOD SHEPHERD."
 - Elsewhere in John JESUS says, "I AM the BREAD OF LIFE,"
 - "I AM the VINE, you are the branches,"
 - "I AM the LIVING WATER,"
 - "I AM the WAY, the TRUTH, and the LIFE,"
 - and "I AM the RESSURECTION and the LIFE."

Today, though, is GOOD SHEPHERD Sunday.

- Though most did in JESUS' time, not many of us have any real experience with sheep or shepherds, so we may not fully understand what JESUS is telling us.
 - But for any who really want to be a follower of JESUS, to be part of HIS flock, it is important to know your SHEPHERD.

JESUS calls HIMSELF the GOOD SHEPHERD, but what does HE mean by that?

- What is a shepherd and what does the shepherd do?
- Let me suggest seven things from today's reading that might help us understand:

1) The shepherd enters by the gate.

- That might seem obvious; how else would someone get in?

Often, many sheep were kept in a common pen with a gatekeeper or a watchman overseeing things.

- When the shepherd arrived to take the sheep to pasture, the gatekeeper would let the shepherd in.

- But the one who wants to steal a sheep climbs over the fence.
- The one who does that is not the shepherd.

2) The shepherd calls the sheep by name.

- He knows the sheep well enough to have names for them and is familiar with each of them.
 - The shepherd's relationship with the sheep is one of caring.

3) The shepherd leads the sheep out.

- The shepherd makes sure the way is safe because he is concerned for the safety of the sheep.

4) The shepherd goes ahead of the sheep and they follow him.

- The shepherd takes the risk of wild animals or other dangers by going first.
 - Again, the shepherd is a leader the sheep can trust to keep them safe.

5) The shepherd is recognized by the sheep.

- The sheep know the know the shepherd and they recognize his voice.
 - This is a two-way relationship with the shepherd knowing the sheep and the sheep knowing the shepherd.

6) The shepherd leads the sheep to safe pasture.

- When the sheep follow the shepherd, he will lead them to the place that is best for them: where they are safe and can be fed.
- BTW, “pasture” and “pastor” come from the same root; the pastor is the one who leads the flock to safe pasture.

7) The shepherd gives the sheep abundant life.

- Why does the shepherd do this? Because he cares for the sheep.
- What does abundant life mean? It’s different for each of us, but I encourage you to take a moment and think about what it would mean for you in relationship to the GOOD SHEPHERD.

While you may have your specific thoughts on what abundant or full life for yourself would look like, in general, there are three parts to this, three Ss to it.

First, is salvation.

- JESUS says, “I AM the WAY, the TRUTH, and the LIFE.”
- This means that anyone entering into GOD’S presence by following JESUS through faith in HIM will be saved.
- Salvation means a future—an eternal one with GOD.
- Salvation means that problems, pain, suffering, loss, and even death are not the final word.
- Knowing the SHEPHERD brings abundant and full life through salvation.

The second is safety.

- The SHEPHERD protects the sheep by leading them to a safe place.
- Following JESUS, the GOOD SHEPHERD, leads us to make better choices in life.
- Following JESUS means having HIS presence in every moment of life.
- Abundant life means having the safety that comes in relationship to the GOOD SHEPHERD.

Third is satisfaction.

- JESUS told the Samaritan woman of the satisfaction provided by living water.
- JESUS offers that satisfaction over and against worldly hungers with the bread of life.
- JESUS promises that those who follow HIM as the shepherd will find pastures that will satisfy ever human need.

The SHEPHERD loves the sheep.

The SHEPHERD cares for the sheep.

The SHEPHERD even dies for the sheep so that the sheep can have abundant life.

How then do we obtain access to the abundant life our SHEPHERD offers?

Step one is: recognize the SHEPHERD.

- JESUS says, “My sheep know my voice.”

A traveler in the Middle East came upon a watering hole where three shepherds were watering their flocks.

- The sheep had become intermingled, and the traveler wondered how they would sort things out.

Then, one of the shepherds began walking and calling his sheep.

- Immediately, a number of the sheep separated from the others and followed their shepherd while the rest continued to drink.

The traveler asked one of the remaining shepherds about this and he said, “The sheep listen to my voice.”

- The traveler asked to put on the shepherd’s robe and head covering, which the shepherd agreed to.
- Then the traveler began calling the sheep in Aramaic, but the sheep did not even raise their heads.
 - But when the shepherd put on his own clothing and called the sheep, they stopped drinking, raised their heads, and followed their shepherd.

Worship and Bible study are two important places where we learn to recognize the SHEPHERD.

- As we come to better know HIM, we hear HIS voice and know what HE wants for us.
- This happens when we recognize the SHEPHERD.

The second step is: follow the SHEPHERD.

Another story from the Holy Land.

A group of tourists were told by their guide that, rather than driving the sheep from behind, the shepherds in the Middle East lead the flocks as JESUS described.

- Soon, as they came around a bend in the road, the busload of tourists saw a flock of sheep, being driven from behind.
 - They quickly pointed this out to their guide and teased him about his story of the shepherd leading the flock.
- The guide let them go on for a time, and then he calmly explained to them, “That was not the shepherd driving the flock. That was the butcher.”

It isn’t enough just to learn what the SHEPHERD wants us to do.

- We must follow where HE leads.
- Part of having abundant life is trusting that JESUS will lead us to places that are best for our lives.

The third step is: obey the SHEPHERD.

- On Maundy Thursday, we heard JESUS say, “A new commandment I give you: love one another as I have loved you.”
 - “Serve one another as I have served you.”
 - “Forgive one another as I have forgiven you.”

Behaviors such as these would be an example for the world.

- How we treat others, how we love, how we serve, how we forgive demonstrates our commitment and love for our LORD.
 - Moreover, it shows others the difference CHRIST makes in our lives.

We serve because HE first served us.

We serve because HE calls us to serve.

We serve because the world needs our service.

Loving, serving, and forgiving are the key parts of obeying our SHEPHERD.

- And they are all part of the abundant life JESUS has for us.
 - But they can only be yours if you take the time, make the commitment, and let it be a priority in your life to know your SHEPHERD.