

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
25 April 2021

John 10:11-18

A shepherd was herding his flock when suddenly a brand-new BMW approaches him from nowhere. The driver, a well-dressed young man, lowers the window and asks the shepherd, "If I tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?" The shepherd looks at the man and calmly answers, "Sure, Why not?" The man whips out his Dell notebook computer, connects it to his AT&T cell phone. He surfs to a NASA GPS satellite navigation system to get an exact fix on his location which he then feeds to another NASA satellite that scans the area in an ultra-high-resolution photo. He then opens the digital photo in Adobe Photoshop and exports it to an image processing facility in Hamburg, Germany. Within seconds, he receives an email that the image has been processed and the data stored. Finally, he prints out a full-color, 150-page report on his miniature HP LaserJet printer and turns to the shepherd and says, "You have exactly 1,586 sheep." "That's right. Well, I guess you can take one of my sheep." The Shepherd watches the young man select one of the animals and looks on amused as he stuffs it into the trunk of his car. At this point, the shepherd says to the young man, "Hey, if I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me back my sheep?" The young man thinks about it for a second and then says, "Okay, Why not?" "You're a consultant" says the shepherd. "Wow! That is correct, but how did you guess that?" "No guessing required," answered the shepherd, "You showed up here even though nobody called you; you want to get paid for an answer I already knew; to a question I never asked; and you don't know anything about my business..... now give me back my dog."

Today, we have an amazing reading from the Gospel of John, which I would like to in its proper context. I would like to try to convince us that when it comes to shepherds and sheep, many of us are consultants, when God wants us to be much more. We are in John 10, beginning at the 11 verse and Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." He then will say, "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" five times, as he contrasts the Good Shepherd to the hired hands and to other bad shepherds. We may want to ask here, "Who is he talking to? Why a story about shepherds?" This story began back in Chapter 8, when the Scribes and the Pharisees began to plot against him. They bring a woman caught in adultery, but Jesus refused to judge her. He then starts a long section of teaching where he describes himself as the light of the world, and he places himself above Abraham. We read in 8:59 that they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus was able to escape. Then, almost as a way to prove that he is the light of the world and has the power to give light to those in darkness, he cures a man blind from birth. The Pharisees question the man, who gives testimony about Jesus. This testimony causes the man to be expelled from the Temple. Jesus finds him once again and welcomes him into his fold. The man says, "Lord, I believe!" Jesus then makes a distinction between physical and spiritual blindness, which again enrages

the Pharisees who ask, “Certainly, we are not blind, are we?” This interaction leads Jesus into his Good Shepherd speech. The woman caught in adultery and the blind man are Jesus’s sheep. This is what the passage is all about.

The speech talks about several themes: (a) The gate through which you enter the sheepfold. He who climbs over the wall is a thief and a bandit, but the good shepherd enters through the gate. (b) The sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd; they follow him because they recognize his voice. They do not follow strangers because they do not recognize their voice. (c) Then Jesus describes himself both as the gate who has come so that the sheep may have abundant life, and as the Good Shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. (d) Jesus then contrasts the Good Shepherd to the hired hand who does not love the sheep and who runs away at the first sight of danger. He, on the other hand, knows his sheep and is known by his sheep, and he faces great danger to protect them. (e) God has given him authority to lay down and take up his life for his sheep. (f) Then Jesus introduces the theme of other sheep that do not yet belong to the fold and whom he must bring into the herd, so that they maybe one with him, as he and the Father are one. He knows his sheep and his sheep know him, as he knows the Father and the Father knows him. We read in verse 31 that, “The Jews took up stones again to stone him... but he escaped from their hands.”

The expression, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” is repeated five times in the nine verses we have from John today. Jesus uses an image that has come to represent a number of things for the people of Israel to speak about God’s love for his people. Shepherds symbolize wisdom and experience for some. For others, the image of “Shepherd” leads them to think of the great leaders of Israel. Moses had been a shepherd, so was David and others. The word is often used to describe the King, as we see clearly in the Old Testament. There are others who hold Shepherds in very low esteem. Some see shepherds as dishonest people who are not allowed to give testimony in a court of law, or who perform a job often left to young children, women, or servants.

Whether you like shepherds or not, everyone would have understood the image. Jesus calls himself a shepherd and by this he means a leader, someone called upon to protect and care for sheep. Then Jesus describes the precarious situation of the sheep, which makes necessary such commitment from him. He says that the sheep are under constant threat by wolves that snatch the sheep and scatter them. The sheep are unable to defend themselves. They are prone to wandering away from the herd into dangerous territory. This is the very reason why Jesus is an honorable shepherd. Whereas the hired hand sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep to fend for themselves, Jesus protects the sheep, even if he has to lay down his life to protect them. The sheep have value to Jesus and this value is clearly seen in the relationship he develops with the sheep. He says, “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” He is willing to die for the sheep because he has a relationship with them and each one of them has great value to him. Now, you may ask, “Why are these smelly, dumb animals so valuable that the shepherd is willing to die for them? Are they

extremely expensive? Are they a special breed? Are they so incredibly cute that the shepherd has no choice but to save them? Are they the best producers of milk or wool?"

The good news today is that the passage does not tell us anything about the color, size, gender, or milk productivity of the sheep. All it tells us is that they are weak, defenseless, and in danger. In fact, when you look back at the beginning of chapter 8 and think of the woman caught in adultery, and when you think of the blind man of chapter nine, you realize how defenseless and needy Jesus' sheep are. I say that this is good news because, if you have not guessed it yet, these sheep represent all of us. We are the sheep Jesus is talking about. He knows all of us by name and he is willing to die for all of us. Not because we are white or black. Not because we are wealthy or poor. Not because we are male or female. This shepherd is willing to die for us the sheep in spite of our propensity for wandering, idol worship, and betrayal. He is willing to die because we belong to him, and he knows us by name.

We are Jesus' sheep, but he tells us today, "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." There are other sheep out there who have not yet heard the shepherd's voice and for this reason they do not belong. Jesus says that he is under compulsion to bring them in. This is an emphatic "must." He doesn't say, "I would like to bring them," "I want to be considered as an option by them," "I would be nice if they joined me." He says, "I must bring them into the flock. They must listen to my voice. Some of us believe it is our job to bring sheep into the fold, by any means necessary: by guilting them, by filling them with the fear of damnation, by beating them over the head with our Bibles. But I believe our job is to be "good helpers." The dishonorable helpers runaway at the first sight of trouble. We, as good helpers must be constant and faithful, but we must be no more than signs that point the sheep to the true Shepherd. He will bring them in himself.

There are sheep out there who are in grave danger, they are alone and isolated, they are vulnerable and defenseless. Worse of all, many of them do not even realize that they are in danger. It is our job, yours, and mine, to lead these sheep into the Good Shepherd's flock. It is our job to point them to the one who is willing to protect them, love them, and care for them. But it is important that we realize that we are not the Shepherd, Jesus himself is the shepherd. Our job is to be the helpers, the hired hands, if you will. Now, the question is, are we going to be the kind of helpers that run for cover at the first sight of danger? Are we going to be the type of helpers who are willing to let others suffer in their ignorance and their despair? Or are we willing to be faithful to our commission in spite of fear of ridicule or danger? It is not our job to determine who belongs and who does not belong. That is the Shepherd's job, but our job, like a good helper is to point the way, so the sheep may find their shepherd.

I pray that today you will listen to his voice calling you to leave the comfort of your life and to engage in the sheep-tending business, not as a consultant, but as someone who cares deeply for God's own sheep. Amen!