

Abide with Us – Part 3

John 10:11-18

1. Savior Shepherd.

2. Sheep and Shepherds.

3. Sacrificial Shepherd.

4. Sanctified Sheep.

- *Philippians 2:3-11*

Lent involves:

Sacrificial Subtraction *and*

Sacrificial Services

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West Valley Church
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Abide With Us¹

John 10:14-18

The 23rd Psalm is one of the most famous parts of the Bible, and it holds some of the most famous words in all of Scripture: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want . . .”

This image of God as a shepherd is all over the Old Testament Scriptures. The children of Israel are referred to as sheep—meaning they are foolish, prone to wandering, in need of guidance, leading, and care. The imagery extends to the heroes of the faith too: Moses and King David are both literal shepherds before they are leaders of Israel.

So then we get to our Scripture for today in John 10, and Jesus calls himself “the good shepherd.” Let me read to you that passage for this third Sunday in the season of Lent. Would you stand with me as I read it for us? Thank you – standing helps us show honor to God’s Word, and helps us be in a more attentive posture to hear from the Holy Spirit. This is what the passage says:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep 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 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. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No 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. (John 10:11-18, niv)

Thanks for standing. I’m praying that God will bless the reading of his Word to our hearts to transform us by renewing our minds.

Again, in that passage for today in John 10, Jesus calls himself “the good shepherd,” and that comes with all the context from the Old Testament with it. Jesus isn’t just making some kind of shallow point about his care and compassion; he is making a prophetic declaration that he is in fact the Messiah. He’s just not the Messiah God’s Jewish people were expecting.

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Instead of coming with strength and power to fight a bloody revolution for the liberation of God's people, Jesus comes like a shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. So once again, He is working in ways that they don't expect, for a kingdom that looks different from the one they think they want. Let's see what this says to us today, so we can have a deeper understanding of Jesus and what he can do in us, for us, and through us.

Starting with the picture of the...

1. Savior Shepherd.

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel gives us just one example of a scriptural passage where God is described as a shepherd of the Israelite sheep. It's in chapter 34, and it refers to an era that is often called the "day of the Lord" and it talks about a time when predators will no longer attack, and the sheep (the Israelites) will be safe. The idea of the messiah as a shepherd would be familiar to those in the Jewish faith.

Then, think about the fact that King David was a shepherd as a young boy, in a family of shepherds. As king, he is also described as a shepherd of the Israelite people, which is why it makes sense for Jesus, who is in David's family line, to claim this identity too. Remember that in Bible times, vocations were family-based—children carried on the same professions as their fathers—and the lineage of King David is connected with shepherding. So Jesus is a shepherd, too.

There are multiple other Old Testament scriptures, including many psalms, that describe God as the ultimate good shepherd who cares for his sheep.

So when Jesus came along and claimed to be *the* Good Shepherd, he is blatantly and clearly identifying himself as the Messiah. We might not see it so clearly, but I promise you, the Jews who heard Jesus say this knew it immediately – especially the religious leaders. The Pharisees know their Scripture well, so they recognized right away Jesus' references to Ezekiel, and they were not thrilled by his claiming messiahship. Jesus equates his presence with the year (or day) of the Lord – demonstrated in the ways he acts compassionately toward the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized of both Jewish and Roman society.

My friends, don't be mistaken about this: Jesus knew exactly who he was – who he is – he is the Savior Shepherd, the Messiah. The shepherd who has come to save his sheep, and boy, do we need it.

An article in USA Today three years ago² shared the story of a sheep that received a much-needed shearing after rescuers in Australia found the abandoned animal with more than 75 pounds of wool weighing it down. A video of his transformation on TikTok had more than 18.5 million views (and that was in 2021 – I have no idea how many it has now). After animal sanctuary staff gave him the long-overdue shearing, they found the fleece clocked in at about 78 pounds.

² Ryan W. Miller, "Baarak, a sheep rescued in Australia with over 75 pounds of wool, is 'getting more confident every day,'" USA Today (2-24-21)

The interesting thing is that there were many comments from animal activists who actually criticized the sheep shearers for hurting the sheep in his natural habitat. They bloviated that the sheep should be left alone and not sheared, as if the shearing were somehow harmful to the animal.

According to Kelly Dinham with the rescuing animal sanctuary, sheep need at least yearly shearing to keep their coats light enough for the animals, otherwise it will continue to grow. Despite his heavy fleece, the sheep was actually underweight after being sheared. The wool around his face impaired his vision, too. Dinham said they found grit and debris "pooling in the gap between his cornea and the lid." And a grass seed stuck in there had caused an ulcer. He said if a sheep goes for an extended period of time without adequate care, the overgrown wool can lead to build up at the sheep's other end of waste that then could lead to infection.

Here's the point: like those activists, in all your vast knowledge, you might think you don't need a shepherd to save you. You might think you have it figured out. But left to yourself you will be buried in crippling and infected fleece. We need a savior shepherd.

So then our attention turns to the relationship between...

2. Sheep and Shepherds.

Sheep tend to wander. In Psalm 23 it talks about the shepherd leading us to still waters, and that's because sheep have been known to drink water with strong currents, and then they are swept away and drowned.

Sheep can also get themselves trapped in hard-to-reach places, or areas where there are no food sources nearby. Speaking of viral videos, maybe you saw the video of the boy who rescued a sheep that had jumped headfirst into a ditch and was stuck. The boy used a belt around the sheep to carefully pull the sheep out. In freedom, the sheep took about three bounding leaps – right back headfirst wedged into the ditch! Sheep have a tendency to get into places that need rescuing.

Sheep are also vulnerable to predators. They don't have claws, sharp teeth, or a way to camouflage themselves. Sheep barely kick; that's it. In fact, if you attack a sheep, do you know what they do? They just say, "baahh-kk-off." Bad joke. But they are defenseless. So shepherds are the primary way that sheep stay safe.

Shepherding sheep can be a very filthy job, especially in Bible times. Maybe you've seen those paintings of Psalm 23 with a suspiciously Anglo-European Jesus with glowing clean robes, clean sandaled feet, and well-conditioned hair with a smooth staff, gently cradling a sheep. But shepherding was not a highly favored job in the time of Jesus. The hours were long, not just during the day but also because shepherds had to sleep with their flocks overnight to protect them from nocturnal predators. Shepherds were criticized for being away from their families too much, leaving them vulnerable. Shepherds were often in danger themselves due to bad weather, predators, thieves, and having to range far from home in order to let the sheep graze. Sheep had no idea how hard the shepherd had to work to keep them from harming themselves or becoming food for predators.

Another thing about the relationship between sheep and shepherds was that each shepherd had a unique call for their sheep. Different flocks of sheep often grazed together, so when it was time to separate, the shepherds relied on the sheep recognizing the sound of their voice as well as their unique call. The sheep would not follow unless they heard the call they knew from the voice they knew.

Here's the thing: if we are sheep, then we need to listen.

Did you know you can get a cellphone signal on the highest mountain in Colorado? If you get lost hiking that mountain, you should probably answer your phone — even if you don't recognize the caller's number.

That was the message shared by Lake County Search and Rescue, which tried to help a lost hiker on Mount Elbert by sending out search teams, and one of the things they did was repeatedly call the hiker's phone, but got no answer. The hiker spent the night on the side of the mountain before finally reaching safety.

The hiker set out at 9 a.m. on a route that normally takes about seven hours to complete, round-trip. A caller alerted search and rescue teams around 8 p.m., and a five-person team stayed in the field looking for the hiker until 3 a.m., when the team suspended the search. More searchers hit the mountain the next morning, but then the hiker appeared, having finally made it back to their car. The hiker had gotten disoriented in an ordeal that lasted about 24 hours.

At the news conference, the search and rescue leader said, "One notable take-away is that the hiker ignored repeated phone calls from us because they didn't recognize the number."³

Sadly, it is sometimes our habit to avoid the shepherd who is trying to rescue us. God went looking for Adam in the Garden when he was hiding in fear (Genesis 3:9). Jesus came to earth to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), and he repeatedly called the lost to come to him for salvation, but they refused to respond (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34).

This is why Jesus emphasizes that his sheep know him. He has a unique call—to salvation, freedom, and inclusion in the kingdom of God. But he also has a unique voice—gentle, loving, compassionate. We would do well to listen for his voice and become familiar with it, because if Christ acts in the character of God and loves his sheep, then God's people can be confident that those acting in ways that are not loving and compassionate are not acting on behalf of the Shepherd.

When we see people claiming they care for sheep but acting in ways that are not in keeping to the ways of the Shepherd, we know they are thieves or predators. And one of the key things about our shepherd is that he is a...

3. Sacrificial Shepherd.

Jesus' love and compassion for his sheep go so far that, as the Good Shepherd, he lays down his life for the sheep.

³ Bill Chappell, "A lost hiker ignored rescuers' phone calls, thinking they were spam," NPR (10-26-21)

In Psalm 23, the shepherd is described as walking with the sheep through the valley of the shadow of death. This is not metaphorical; Jesus went through the actual valley of death for us. And remember, in the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus declares that one lost sheep is more important to the shepherd than the ninety-nine who are not lost.

In Jewish religious practice, sheep were also used for sacrifices—an offering ritual meant to bring forgiveness to the worshipper in the Old Testament. In a role reversal, Jesus says *he as the shepherd is willing to take on the role of the sacrificed lamb in order to save the sheep*. We often call Jesus the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” That’s the way John the Baptist introduced Jesus. (John 1:29-32) What does it mean to you that Jesus is the good shepherd who—instead of having his life taken from him—willingly lays down his life for the sheep?

Leith Anderson is a Christian researcher and author, and he wrote once about how, for more than fifty years, his father was a pastor and had officiated at numerous funerals. He wrote, “My father often told a favorite story about a little boy who was desperately ill. His parents recognized that he probably soon would die. They sent for the local pastor. He came at night to visit the child, who was semiconscious. He was unable to speak and apparently never spoke in any acknowledgment of the pastor's presence.

The pastor was alone in the child's upstairs room and left late at night. He returned early the next morning after the boy had died. He did his best to console the parents. He prayed with them. He grieved with them.

Later the parents asked the pastor if he had any explanation for something that had happened. They told the pastor that in the hours before their son died and at the time of his death, he was holding the ring finger of one hand with his other hand. He died in that position.

It was then the pastor explained what he had said to the boy that night when they were together in the child's room. He had wanted to explain to that child on the edge of eternity not only the importance of being a Christian but in a child's language how to become one. (Thinking of the 23rd Psalm,) he said he had taken their son's hand and first held his thumb and had said, “The--because, we're talking about one of a kind.”

Then he held his next finger and said, “Lord. That’s Jesus.” For the next finger, he said God himself *is* right here. (The Lord is...) The next finger: *my*, a personal commitment and relationship. For the last finger: *shepherd*, the one who owns, who died, who cares and loves: Jesus.

While the boy had not spoken, he had heard. Before he died, he put his hand around the finger to say, “The Lord is *my* shepherd.”

This Shepherd has laid down his own life as a sacrificial lamb so that you and I could be sheep in his sheep pen, under the care of the Good Shepherd.

Love, compassion, and becoming one of us is at the heart of Jesus’ life and message. God leaves power and might behind in order to unite with humanity in our full humanness. The kingdom of God is not about gaining power through violence, which is what the Jews of Jesus’ day thought it was (and, quite frankly, it’s what many Christians today think it is).

No, the Kingdom of God is about gentle, loving kindness that sacrifices for others—even though we still often look for or prefer the violence and power.

So we are left with a decision; are we going to be self-serving sheep who struggle for power and control, or are we going to be sheep after the Savior and Sacrificial Shepherd?

What it comes down to is, are we going to be...

4. Sanctified Sheep.

To be sanctified is to be surrendered to the Holy Spirit in our lives so we can be like Jesus – Christ-like in our thinking and acting and in the ways that we live out our lives toward others.

If the way of the Good Shepherd is through the gate of compassion, of love, of sacrifice, of laying down power—then anything that doesn't embody those things is not of the Good Shepherd.

The safety and well-being of the sheep matter to God. We often think this is just a spiritual word, but there is real, physical care implied in the caring of sheep, which are fed, loved, protected.

As the sheep who follow the voice of Christ, we should recognize and care about those being torn apart by others. The kingdom of God operates differently than the kingdoms of the world. Where the world says to gather wealth and power, the kingdom of God says to lay those things down and follow Jesus to the cross.

If we follow the voice of the Good Shepherd, what is that voice calling us to do? God's Word answers:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:3-11, niv)

Christ might be calling us in this season of Lent *away* from habits, places, or things that keep us separated from God. That's what we often think about in Lent – giving something up.

But we are also called *toward* living lives that are abundant, filled with grace and mercy toward others.

Here's the thing about

Lent: it involves:

Sacrificial Subtraction *and*

Sacrificial Service.

We are called away from things, but we are also called to embody the self-giving love of Christ, who willingly laid down his life for his sheep. Where can we lay down our lives for those around us?

You know, in different times and in different places even today, sometimes this call has been *literal* for the people of God – many faithful Christ followers have lost their earthly lives as a result of following the call of Jesus. Other times, we are called to give up certain powers or privileges out of love for others.

When we embody Christ's sacrificial laying down of his life, we join in the glory of the resurrection (see Philippians 3). When we embody Christ's sacrifice in the world, others experience the resurrection power of Christ too, which can change entire communities.

Lent is a season of sacrifice. We lay down some things in order to pick up other things. We lay down the things of the world in order to connect with God in more life-giving ways. We see in this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd a God who gave up everything in order to love us well. So we respond to the voice of the Good Shepherd by doing likewise—laying aside our power, our privilege, and sometimes our lives to follow after him, embrace others in love, and ultimately see the power of the resurrection permeate the world.

Prayer

Benediction:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.
(Hebrews 13:20-21)