**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**Sunday May 3, 2020**

**“Following the Good Shepherd” (John 10:1-10)**

 A distinctive feature in John’s Gospel is a series of seven “I am” sayings, spoken by Jesus:

• I am the bread of life (John 6:35, 51)

• I am the light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5)

• I am the gate (John 10:7, 9)

• I am the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14)

• I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25)

• I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)

• I am the true vine (John 15:1, 5)

With these seven “I am” sayings Jesus affirms his divine identity, while expressing his divinity in relation to people. These “I am” sayings are not abstract declarations of Christ’s character; rather, they highlight the blessings of his presence for humanity, for you and me, and for the community of faith. These seven “I am” sayings also call us to reflect upon our relationship with Christ and to ponder some important questions. Are we feeding on the Bread of life? Are we living in the light of Christ? Are we walking on the Way to the Father? Are we growing and connected to the True Vine? A good devotional exercise would be to read through these seven passages, reflect on who Jesus is, and then contemplate your relationship with him in light of these images from Scripture.

 Today, the voice of Jesus invites us to consider two of his “I am” sayings in John chapter 10 - “*I am the gate*” and “*I am the good shepherd*.” These two sayings appear within a beautiful mixed metaphor that involves sheep, a shepherd and a gate. Within this parable, Jesus presents himself as both the Good Shepherd and the Gate of the sheep pen. These two images are closely related and both emphasize that Jesus protects and gives life to those who follow him. Jesus is the *gate* for the sheepfold, safeguarding the sheep from dangerous people by allowing only the true shepherd to have access (John 10:1-2). Jesus is the *gate* for he is the way to *salvation* and *abundant life* for the sheep, for those who walk through this divine doorway(10:9-10). At the same time, Jesus is the *good shepherd* who puts his life on the line for the sheep, defending them from ravenous wolves (10:11-13). Jesus, the *good* *shepherd*, leads the sheep out of the pen to green pastures and grants them abundant life (10:3-4, 9).

 These images of Jesus as sheep-gate and good shepherd are a source of great comfort for us because they vividly illustrate the loving care and the abundant life that we receive from our Lord. Shepherds and sheep are pervasive images in the Bible. Some of the most important characters in the Old Testament were shepherds: Abel, Jacob, Moses and David. But most familiar to us is the use of this image to depict God’s relationship with his his people. One of the best-known and well-loved psalms is Psalm 23. Its affirmation that “*The Lord is my Shepherd*,” who provides for, guides and protects his sheep, has given many believers hope and comfort amidst the darkest of times. This morning’s Old Testament reading from Psalm 100 uses shepherding imagery to illustrate God’s loving care over humanity:

*“Know that the Lord is God.*

*It is he who made us, and we are his;*

*we are his people, the sheep of his pasture”*

(Psalm 100:3).

In response to the steadfast love of the Divine Shepherd, the Psalmist calls us, the sheep, to *shout for joy to the Lord,* to *worship the Lord with gladness,* and to *enter his gates with thanksgiving* (Psalm 100:1-2, 4). The Divine Shepherd cares for his flock, but the sheep are to respond with praise and thanksgiving for his enduring love.

 While the image of God as our Shepherd is a reassuring one, it is also a challenge for us, the sheep. Even though we have experienced the love, care, and safety of the sheepfold, we are still prone to wander from the Good Shepherd. Our desire to forge our own way often leads us to become “*scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd*” (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Matthew 9:36). This reminds me of a verse from that wonderful hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing:*

*“Let that goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love*
*Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above”*

 To keep from wandering, it is essential that the sheep recognize the shepherd’s voice and follow him. Jesus’ illustration of the shepherd and the sheep emphasizes that their relationship is one of familiarity, trust, and faithfulness. His words in John 10:3-4 articulate this intimate connection between the shepherd and his sheep:

• The sheep *recognize* the voice of the shepherd.
• The shepherd calls his *own* sheep *by name* and he *leads* them out.

• The shepherd walks *ahead* and the sheep *follow* because they *recognize* his voice.

Since Jesus intended this picture of the shepherd and the sheep to illustrate the relationship between God and us, this passage should raise some significant questions for each one of us. Do I recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd? Am I listening to him? Do I trust the Good Shepherd enough to follow? Do I have the faithfulness to stick with the Good Shepherd wherever he leads?

 So, there is both *comfort* and *challenge* in this metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep. The Good Shepherd protects us, provides for us, and knows each one of *by name.* But he *calls* us to *follow* him in trust and obedience. Therefore, we must be attentive to our Lord and listen to his voice so that we may faithfully follow his lead.

 My friend and mentor, Kevin Quast wrote this wonderful summary of this passage:

“To this day in the Middle East, the shepherd walks ahead of the flock, calling the sheep on with his voice, rather than driving them from behind as in Western culture. The picture, then, is an appropriate illustration of the relationship between master and disciple. For the sheep to experience the life the good shepherd provides, they must listen for his voice and follow him. For Jesus’ sheep, following involves listening, understanding, believing, and depending upon Jesus” (*Reading the Gospel of John,* p. 81).

 This passage is also a cautionary tale for all who are called to church leadership. It is essential that all Christians, both leaders and laity follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd. At the same time, God calls capable women and men to be *shepherds* within various congregations. This is reflected in the title *pastor,* a term that many Christian leaders use to describe their role within their churches. *Pastor* comes from the Latin word for *shepherd.* Pastoral ministry, then, is modeled after the Good Shepherd, Jesus. This truth causes me to get down on my knees and pray for God’s grace!

 In Ezekiel 34:1-6, God voices his disappointment at the failure of Israel’s leaders to care for his people. Calling them “the shepherds of Israel,” he chides them for selfishly putting their own needs first and abandoning the flock to clear danger. God declared to them, *“You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.**So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals”* (Ezekiel 34:4-5). Instead of fostering the life of the sheep, these shepherds came “*only to steal and kill and destroy*” (John 10:10).

 The calling to be a *shepherd* is a high one indeed. It is one that carries with it a great deal of responsibility for people trust their pastor and look to him or her for guidance. Famous missionary, pastor, and theologian Lesslie Newbigin describes the role of pastor as this: “The Good Shepherd ‘calls his own sheep by name and leads them out’. They follow him ‘because they know his voice’. A true Christian pastor will be one who can dare to say to his people: ‘Follow me, as I am following Jesus’. That is a terrible test for any pastor. A true pastor must have such a relation with Jesus and with his people that he follows Jesus and they follow him” (*The Good Shepherd,* p. 14).

 Like the Good Shepherd, a true pastor must “*call his sheep by name*.” This means more than just knowing the names of his or her congregants. It means that, “you care something for that person as a person.” “At the heart of a true pastoral ministry there is the knowledge that every human being is unique and uniquely precious” (Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd,* p. 15). True pastoral ministry should never value programs over people, but sees each person as “a uniquely precious person for whom Christ’s blood was shed” (Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd,* p. 16).

 Like the Good Shepherd, the true pastor must lead the flock. To do this it is necessary for the true pastor to be following the Good Shepherd and listening to his voice so that when he or she speaks to the flock they can recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd. But the sheep should also be aware that the path is not a comfortable one; it is a path with many challenges. Following the Good Shepherd means taking the road that he took, and that road is marked by self-denial and cross-bearing.

 The secret of a true pastor is that the life of the Good Shepherd is being lived out in him or her (Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd,* p. 17). This truth causes me to get down on my knees and pray for God’s grace!

May each one of us hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and may he grant us the strength and the faith to follow his leading.