

Listen to how Jesus talks about his death: *“The reason the 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.”* As Jesus suffered and died and rose for us, who was in control? Jesus was! He did it all willingly. He was perfectly in control, even in death. Do you think Jesus is in control of your life too? Jesus isn’t just with us. He’s not just guiding us. He didn’t just die for us. All authority in heaven and on earth are in his hand, and this Good Shepherd is the one controlling your life and our world.

King David got this! Here’s what he said, trusting in his Shepherd: *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me”* (Psalm 23:4). How can I be afraid? How can you be worried? Jesus told us to be lights in a dark world. What’s different about Christians? What shines? Hopefully it’s the peace you have in the midst of strife. It’s your contentment even when you don’t get your way. It’s faith in the face of death. It’s joy to be a sheep of the Good Shepherd. *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”* If you live like that, your light will shine!

That’s just what Jesus wants! *“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.”* There’s more sheep who need to hear Jesus’ voice! We just got the most recent demographics of our area. Do you know what percentage of people within five miles of our church are not active in any religious organization? 61%. When I say that to older people, they seem very surprised. “Isn’t everyone Christians?” No. When I say that to younger people, they are not surprised at all: “I hardly know anyone who goes to church!” What are we about? Making disciples of Jesus. Teaching people to love to hear Jesus’ voice!

So what are we really teaching people to be? Sheep. “I just wanna be a sheep!” I hope you can say that! Life isn’t about stuff. Life isn’t about success. Life isn’t about promotions. Life isn’t about being strong or independent, because nobody is. Everyone in life is following someone. Whom are you going to follow? There’s only one Good Shepherd. *“We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:6). If you could choose any animal, what animal would you want to be? I just wanna be a sheep. Influenced by Jesus’ voice. Dependent on Jesus’ grace. Saved by Jesus’ death. I just wanna be a sheep. There is nothing better!

John 10:11-18
Pastor Nathan Nass

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2018

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns 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. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No 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.”

“I Just Wanna Be a Sheep!”

If you could choose any animal, what animal would you want to be? Now for some of you, that might sound like a strange question. For others, it’s a question you get asked all the time. I do! “Dad, what animal do you want to be.” And the animals come out. What animals do you think our boys have? Black bear, grizzly bear, polar bear, lion, tiger, leopard, killer whale.... What do they all have in common? Big. Fierce. Strong. I don’t know what your animal collection is like these days, but those animals show our opinion of ourselves. Strong. Independent. “I’m going to be a bear or an eagle or a T-rex...” If you could be any animal, which animal would you choose?

So what animal does God compare us people to more than any other animal in the Bible? Sheep. Strong? Powerful? Independent? Nope. Wandering. Helpless. Foolish. Sheep. Is that really true? “Come on, God, can’t we at least be rhinos or something? Sheep?” God knows us better than we know ourselves. As independent as we think we are, I wonder if we realize how influenced we are by everybody else. We have a member who sews—Kay Brandt. She’s busy altering prom dresses. She told me that it’s very predictable what prom dresses will look like. Just watch Disney movies. Whatever the princess is wearing, four or five years down the road, that’s what prom dresses will look like. After Frozen, all light green dresses like Elsa. We’re so easily influenced!

Like sheep, right? It’s not just teenagers at prom time. As strong as we think we are, I wonder if we realize how dependent we are on others. Isaiah asked me last week how a microwave works. Do you know? I bet about three of you could explain it, but the rest of us still wouldn’t understand! If the power went out across our whole country, like in Puerto Rico, what would we do? Can you see how dependent we are? Can you notice how your heart is always “following” someone? We even use that word—“following”—for Facebook and Twitter, right? We are all following someone. Dependent on someone. What does that make us? Sheep.

But it gets worse. We're not just followers. Not just dependent. We're wanderers. Straying sheep. Earlier in our service, we read from Isaiah, "*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way...*" Now we're talking about sin. God also calls us sheep because we've all gone astray, each of us to his own way. All different sins. All different struggles. All different mistakes and failures and guilt. Do you ever feel lost? Feel guilty? Feel ashamed? Yes. Yes. Yes. God, of course, knows us. He knows just how to describe us. Easily influenced. Dependent on others. Always going astray. What does that make us? Sheep. What do sheep need? A good shepherd!

So Jesus has good news today. "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" Of all the beautiful ways that God describes his relationship with us, this picture of Jesus as our Good Shepherd has especially found a home in Christian hearts. The thought that Jesus really leads us no matter where we are or what we've done or how life looks.... We read Psalm 23 at every funeral. "*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*" Such comfort in life and in death. "*I am the good shepherd.*" If Jesus is the Shepherd, I just wanna be a sheep! I hope you can say that.

But life's not easy for sheep! Here's the problem: There are a lot of shepherds. Jesus isn't the only one who wants to lead you and your family. There are lots of voices calling you. Lots of influences in our world. So Jesus gives us a warning. "*The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns 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.*" Not every voice calling you is really concerned about you and your soul.

So do we know our Shepherd's voice? This is one of the most important aspects of a Christian's life: Distinguishing the voice of Jesus from the voices of the world. Let's practice. Ready? "Your faith is between you and God." Is that Jesus' voice? No! What does Jesus say? "*You are the light of the world.... Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*" (Matthew 5:14-16). Here's another voice: "It's not your place to judge anyone." Is that Jesus' voice? No! Do you know what God's Word says? "*Hate what is evil; cling to what is good*" (Romans 12:9). How about: "There are many different paths to the same god." Is that Jesus' voice? No! What did your Shepherd claim? "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6). It's hard, isn't it? It's hard today to distinguish the voice of Christ from the voices of the world. But this is so important! When you follow the wrong shepherd, what ultimately happens? "*The wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.*" The devil wants to tear us and our faith to pieces. Do we know our Shepherd's voice?

Sadly, people often realize this too late. There's a site online called the Babylon Bee that writes Christian satire. It publishes made-up, ironic stories about Christianity to teach important lessons. This past week, there was an article with the headline: "After 12 Years of Quarterly Church Attendance, Parents Shocked by Daughter's Lack of Faith." In this

made-up article, the parents are quoted as saying, "We don't understand! We came to church whenever there wasn't a sporting event or something more important going on, at least once every three months. How could she fall away?" Do you catch the irony? Who's your kid's shepherd? Is it a sports coach? A TV show? A video game? A superhero? Who's your shepherd? Who do you spend the most time listening to? If it's not Jesus, do you know what's ultimately going to happen? The devil's going to eat us up!

You know who the most dangerous voice in your life comes from? You! We lead ourselves astray more than anyone else does. When troubles come, who is the first one to criticize you? You are! Who is the first one to tear you down? You are! When temptations come, who is the first one to encourage you to give in? You are! Who's the first one to tell you to cover up whatever sin you've committed? You are! One of the greatest influences in your life is the way you speak to yourself! I think Jesus is right. I'd like to think I'm a lion or a tiger or a bear, but I'm really nothing but a sheep, who so easily wanders off after this voice and that voice. What about you? Sheep?

To every sheep, here's what Jesus says, "*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*" Jesus knows me. Jesus knows you. Last week, I was driving through Minneapolis after visiting someone at the hospital. I had to stop at a stop light. Right next to me on the sidewalk, three people were screaming at each other. It was awkward! Know what they were screaming? "You don't even know me! You don't know anything about me!" How often are you screaming those words inside? You know who really knows you? Jesus does. Your Shepherd. You are never alone. You are loved and known and treasured. Even more than your spouse does. More than your parents do. Jesus knows you!

But we can't stop there. Jesus is with us. Jesus knows us. But that's not the heart of Jesus' message. Look in your bulletins at the second paragraph of our text. What phrase comes up over and over again? "*I lay down my life for the sheep.*" Here's what's amazing: Jesus knows. He knows you as you really are—not the false front we can put on for other people. Jesus really knows you. And he still died for you. He knows you, and he still loved you enough to die for you! He's not just a guide. He's our Savior. He laid down his life for us so that we can live. That's upside-down! Sheep are supposed to be sacrificed so that the shepherd can live. Our Shepherd laid down his life for his sheep.

Now when you hear the voices calling you, when you feel people pulling you away from Jesus, ask whether they care enough about you to die for you. Before you let that boyfriend pull you away from Jesus, ask yourself: "Is he willing to die for me?" Before you sacrifice your faith for your career: "Is it going to die for me?" Before you let that sport suck up your time and your money and your life: "Is it going to die for me?" If the answer is, "No!" I'd stick with Jesus! Every other shepherd, every other voice, every other influence in life is trying to get whatever it can out of you. Except Jesus. He came to give. He came to give his life for us and our sins.