



Jesus the Good Shepherd, Stained-glass composition by J LeBreton, Amiens, France 1508-1519

April 21, 2024, Easter 4, Shepherd Sunday

Scripture: Psalm 23 – read in unison

John 10:11-18

10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

10:12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away--and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

10:13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

10:14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,

10:15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

10:16 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.

10:17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

10:18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

### **The Good Shepherd**

*Prayer: O Good Shepherd, help us to recognize the sound of your voice, remind us again that you have a larger following than we are acquainted with. We cannot change history or control the future, so help us to take the next right step with you, confident in your leading, non-anxious for our lives, trusting that you are our good shepherd and will order our steps in faith...*

On this Earth Day weekend, I want to encourage all of us to do what we can, as we have opportunity, to provide the best stewardship for the natural world, which we share not only with one another but with all living things, and which we hope to pass on to the next generations of living things, as we have received it: a viable, inspiring, and glorious habitat. In scripture, I want to

observe that degradation of the natural world is connected to moral corruption. I would like to put a pin in that for a moment and we will come back to it.

Our scripture today grounds us in the natural world. In this case the world of sheep and wolves, shepherds and hired hands. My husband and I saw plenty of Shepherds on our trip to Palestine and Israel a year ago. I was surprised at the time because they appeared not to be using sheep dogs. Sheep dogs are terrific. With one well-trained dog and a horse or a truck you can round up thousands of sheep. Easy. However, a little reflection on this passage... Jesus' concern about the wolves... I looked it up and sure enough there would have been a threat in the form of the Arabian Wolf which would have been a going problem in Jesus' day. I regret to inform you this morning that Arabian Wolves today are critically endangered and protected under Israel's Wildlife Projections Laws.<sup>1</sup> Also, sheep dogs cannot protect against wolves very effectively. The wolf will win that fight every time. I did not see sheepdogs in Israel because culturally they are not effective in that environment.

One of the Bible's frequent metaphors is the one about the shepherd and the sheep. It gets re-purposed a lot,...sheep -- which include rams, such that you might sacrifice, if you remember a ram was stuck by his horns in a thicket and Abraham was directed to sacrifice the ram rather than Isaac, his son, the boy he loved (that's a sermon for another day). Sometimes in the Bible God is the shepherd and we are the sheep, like in Psalm 23. God leads us into green pastures, beside the still waters, I may even travel through the valley of the shadow of death, but even there, your hand will guide me. In the gospels, and in the Revelation of John, Jesus is the lamb of God, and we have been elevated from sheep to shepherds to take care of Jesus' sheep, he tells Peter at the end of the Gospel of John: "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep."<sup>2</sup> He asks Peter to serve as a shepherd to his flock. And he is not meaning sheep at all, he means his followers. All of them. The flock he knows and the other ones too.

When Jesus talks about being the good shepherd, he was talking to people who knew all about bad shepherds and good shepherds. They had them in their families, they had probably been a bad shepherd a time or two, they wanted to be the good one. (You may not think you are a bad driver, but you have probably been a bad driver once or twice.) Shepherding requires knowledge of the herd and the terrain, sources of water, pasture lands, knowing possible threats to the herd like: cliffs, poisonous plants, occasionally being called upon to help with lambing, go after a lost sheep without losing sight of the whole heard, and vigilance while for hours and hours nothing is happening except that the sheep are grazing, or sleeping, or standing around. Like any job in security, it is boring until you are on the brink of catastrophe.

We are in a portion of John's gospel where Jesus uses a series of "I am" statements. Jesus says he is the good shepherd. Right before this passage he says: "I am the gate for the sheep." He is the protection for the sheep. Contrasting those who came before to thieves who came to steal and kill, Jesus' purpose is that the sheep may have life. Then he says, "I am the good shepherd." And he understands that at least 4 ways:

1. The one who lays down his life for his sheep. And he contrasts that do the hired hand who wouldn't do that. When danger comes, the hired hand does a quick calculation, amount paid vs. value of life, and leaves the sheep and runs away. Exposing the sheep to the wolves. Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.gov.il/en/pages/wildlife\\_protection\\_law\\_1955](https://www.gov.il/en/pages/wildlife_protection_law_1955)

<sup>2</sup> John 21:15-17

says that he can freely lay down his own life and take it up again. This is the power of this good shepherd.

2. Jesus says he is the good shepherd, and he knows his sheep, and they know him, by the sound of his voice. They know their shepherd's voice. You know his voice.
3. And then he emphasizes that he has other sheep in another flock, which he will bring to combine with this flock. "So, there will be one flock, one shepherd." Let me highlight that the sheep do not do this, the shepherd does.
4. Finally, this is his identity. This is Jesus' "I am" statement. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

I'd like to go back to where we began, the shepherd imagery is one that is played with throughout scripture to make a lot of different theological points. Jesus goes from being the gate, to the good shepherd. So just because you are the sheep in this scripture doesn't mean you will not be the shepherd in the next one. With leadership responsibilities of your own. What are you good at? What would you do even if no one rewarded you? What do you pay attention to that other people dismiss? What is your "I am" statement? Big or small? Jesus desire to take on this role is what makes the good shepherd good.

I said at the beginning that in scripture, and this happens in the Psalms and in the Prophets, degradation of the natural world is connected to moral corruption. For me, one of the hard things about talking about Climate change is that it is such a huge topic and a lot of education around the climate crisis leads people to a pretty discouraged state of mind. There's a medical term: climate anxiety – which we need to be mindful of, in ourselves and in one another. We are in a climate crisis, the world as we know it is facing threats to its identity on all sides, and they are very serious. The good shepherd is an image of caretaking; the good shepherd is a caretaker. And all of us are cared for and supported by this earth, and we need to step up and care for it when we can. Some days we are the lamb, the sheep, or the shepherd.

There is an organization I follow called Interfaith Power and Light. Get it? It sounds like a Utility company...but it is not that kind of power and light. Today begins their annual week of climate action. They ask people for this week to set an intention to care for creation and protect our neighbors. To care for every living creature and every community suffering the impacts of our changing climate -- from extreme heat to wildfires to droughts, to flooding, to more frequent and higher intensity storms. There are ways you can do this at home by reducing, reusing, recycling. And there are people you know who can also have an impact. There are conversations we need to have, and support and encouragement we need from each other to move forward. The first part of caretaking, which is a form of leadership, the first part is paying attention.

Jesus knows his sheep, and his sheep know him. They know his voice; they know he will not lead them astray. This week, listen for the voice of your shepherd, you know, the voice you know you know.

Listen. Remember his deep love/care for you. Do not be afraid. All things are possible.

The prophet Isaiah said: The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.<sup>3</sup> I think that could apply to Arabian wolves, and to people in Niantic and Waterford. To Dodge Pond, and to Millstone Point, to lands which have been polluted with toxic chemicals, and to

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 11:6

Tribal people who have lost control of their ancestral lands. And to people who regret having said some things, and regret not having said some things.

Jesus is our good shepherd. The pastures ahead are green.

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This image is a painting by Julien Dupre (1851-1910) which he titled "The Good Shepherd." At the time he painted it, the subject of women agricultural workers was popular in artistic circles in France

Do you see Jesus' presence, or do you see Jesus' absence in this scene?

This image is a painting by Julien Dupre (1851-1910) which he titled "The Good Shepherd." At the time he painted it, the subject of women agricultural workers was popular in artistic circles in France. Sheep, a rod/staff, a green pasture... its evocative Our scriptures are Psalm 23 and John 10, Jesus says that he is the good shepherd, not a hired hand who is only working for the money, but a good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. What is your I am statement?