

Good Shepherd Sunday 2017
Rev. Doug Floyd
John 10:1-18

Today we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, which is traditionally part of Eastertide. Throughout this season we continue to rehearse the historical moment when Jesus Christ dies upon the cross, is buried, and resurrected on the third day. The day when the power of sin and death was broken. But this is not simply a memory of a past historical event. It is a rehearsal of His Living Presence. For Jesus Christ, the Resurrected One, walks among us even now. By His Spirit, He is working in our midst even now, and He is leading us into the fullness of His love and holiness.

In today's Gospel He says to us,

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." Jn 10:14–18.

In today's passage, Jesus spends a great deal of time exposing false shepherds who are thieves and robbers. He is convicting the Pharisees who lord over the people with their wisdom of the law, but fail to reveal the love of God in their word and act. He is exposing all the false shepherds from across the ages who rule unjustly, lead people astray, use fear as a means of control, manipulate people for their own benefit. I could go on.

I think we all are familiar with false shepherds in the workplace, in the school system, even in the church, and sadly even in the home. As I reflected on this passage today, I began think of the first commandment.

⁶ "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ⁷ "You shall have no other gods before me. (Dt 5:6–7)

In this command, we see a distinction between God and gods. The Hebrews have been rescued from the gods of Egypt, from the house of Pharaoh, from the house of slavery. In this command, the Israelites are warned not to return to those gods, those powers who enslave. In Pharaoh, we see the human form of those false gods. He is the ruler of Egypt. He is like a Father over the land. Or more specifically like a shepherd. There is evidence that both the Pharaoh and the

Egyptian gods were depicted as shepherds of the people.¹ As the shepherd of the people, Pharaoh enslaved them, oppressed them, and even killed their children.

Once the Lord rescues His people from this house of slavery, he warns them not to return. The command “No Other Gods” is a call from the true God and Father of us all. Only He can love us rightly. The false shepherd always enslaves, always takes advantage, always abuses his people. This false voice that enslaves is speaking in the garden, seducing Adam and Eve in enslavement. Though it takes different shapes and names, we see this tempter, this enslaver throughout the Biblical story, also leading people into sin, into the way of oppression, into the way of death.

The end result is always the people are dehumanized. They are enslaved in some form. They take on the activity of dehumanizing others. They become oppressors themselves. It replicates. We see the nature of sin is that it begins to affect everything. It reverberates into the world and causes damage. Damaged relationships. Damage to people.

Now it wouldn't be too hard for us to look around and see false shepherds all around us. False forms of authority. People who lead the people of God astray. Or simple people who oppress. Now sometimes these false shepherds come as seducers, but many times, people don't have a choice. They maybe under ruling governments that oppress them. Every single day of the week, someone's being oppressed in the world. Millions are being oppressed every single day of the week. How many people suffer every day of the week live in homes of oppressors?

Of people who oppress the children or oppress the wives or sometimes vice versa. It could be in the workplace. Sometimes a manager takes on this role. It's quite common. Managers often can become the very people who crush the spirit of people and oppress them in different ways. It could even happen in the school. Either with classmates or even teachers or people in positions of authority. It's actually all around us.

Into this oppression, Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd,” the faithful one who will not lead you into oppression and slavery but to freedom. He is no longer talking about being a good shepherd among other good shepherds.² He is saying, “I AM The Good Shepherd.” The God of Israel, the I AM I AM stands before us in the person of Jesus Christ, the son of God. He is one

¹ There are other shepherds – not all are good. (*Egyptian Rulers and Gods as “Shepherd”*) Egyptian epithets using shepherd as a title for their gods and kings, (i.e., Pharaoh) are rarer than their Near Eastern neighbors, but the concept and the title are still utilized. Amon-Re (the creator and sun god) and Osiris (the god of fertility and resurrection of the dead) wear the title. Osiris is often depicted with a shepherd's crook. Amon-Re is known as “the good shepherd” (Beyerlin, *NERT*, 13). He created his people, is a “herdsman who loves his herds” (*ANET*, 371), and a shepherd who diligently provides for his people (*NERT*, 40). Matthew Montonini, “[Shepherd](#),” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

² “Jesus, the good shepherd—this has nothing to do with common idylls and poetry about shepherds and sheep. Everything of that sort ruins the text. *Ego eimi*—“I am”—with this it becomes clear that it is not about shepherds and their work in general but about Jesus Christ alone. I am *the* good shepherd—not *a* good shepherd, as if Jesus compared himself with other good shepherds and learned from them what a good shepherd should be (cf. in the original the double article: *the* shepherd, *the* good one!). One can only experience what a good shepherd is from *the* good shepherd to whom there is no comparison, from the “I,” from Jesus.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, ed. Dirk Schulz and Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Claudia D. Bergmann et al., vol. 15, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 547–548.

and only the Good Shepherd. The true shepherd, the Good Shepherd that fulfills the prophecies of the Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, the Psalmist, and more. The Good Shepherd has come.

We do not understand Jesus through the lens of shepherds but rather we understand the role of the shepherd through Jesus. With that in mind, let us consider how Jesus describes and demonstrates the Good Shepherd. He lists at least seven things in this passage.

1. He enters the sheepfold by the door and He is the door.
2. The sheep recognize His voice and He calls the sheep by name.
3. He goes before the sheep and leads them.
4. He has come to give them life abundant.
5. He knows the sheep and the sheep know Him (just as Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father).
6. He will gather all His sheep even those in other folds.
7. He lays down His life for the sheep and He will take it up again by the authority of the Father.

As we look at all of these characteristics, we realize that Jesus is talking about something that goes far beyond any human shepherd. This is an image that no human could fulfill. While the sheep may recognize their shepherd's voice, and he may protect and lead them, a mere human shepherd cannot give them life, he cannot know them intimately like a Father and Son, he does not gather sheep from many folds into his own, and he does not die and live again for the sheep.

Jesus is describing something only God can do. He alone is the Good Shepherd. And we are the sheep. He is gathering His sheep to Himself. His sheep wandering on the hills alone. His sheep stranded in the dark forest. His sheep enslaved and beaten by false shepherds. He is gathering His sheep. He knows our thoughts, our fears, our pain, our sins, and by His Spirit, He is gathering up into communion with Himself and the Father.

As I think of Him gathering, I am thinking of a part of poem by Christian Wiman.

In the poem, he uses an ancient word, "riven," which means something that has been ripped apart. Think of a log being split. The axe striking the log and it splitting under the pressure. That is riven. But the word also speaks to the condition of the heart: to be torn apart, to be in such deep distress that we are coming undone. We suffer in a world of sin where we have been sinned against and we have sinned against others. We have been hurt and we have hurt others. We know the pain of life too well. We are broken, split, riven.

Wiman writes,

*God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
sing his being simply by being
the thing it is:
stone and tree and sky,
man who sees and sings and wonders why³*

He mentions stone and tree and sky and man. All things are riven, split apart in some way, damaged by sin. In Romans 8 we learn that because of human sin,

*²⁰ ...creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope
²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of
the glory of the children of God. (Ro 8:20–21)*

The whole world has been impacted by the sin of humankind. And yet it is still very glorious. Wiman says that each thing sings by being the thing it is. Humans, stones, trees, and sky are riven in some way and yet we all are created to sing His glory by simply being who we are. In the midst of our state of being shorn, being broken, being damaged by sin, the Good Shepherd goes. God goes. As Wiman repeats again,

*God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,
means a storm of peace.
Think of the atoms inside the stone.
Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into a stillness where*

God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made

Yes, we are broken, yes we have known pain and yet we belong to Him and He belongs to us. He has made us for His glory. And He goes. The Good Shepherd goes out to us in our state of pain and brokenness and calls us by name.

The reality of His redeeming grace is made known to us in a variety of ways, but always directing us back to the goodness of God revealed in Jesus Christ. St Anthony heard the gospel ring out from a church as he walked by. St Patrick encountered the God of grace while suffering in slavery. The poet Gwenallt, a 20th century poet, became a Marxist and totally left his Christian faith. He even went to prison for terrorism because in Wales he bombed a building. Then he comes back to the Lord. He writes a poem about his return to the Lord where he says that the hymns that he heard in the church as a child had become birds in the air. Wherever he went, he heard the birds. The birds made him hear the hymns. They called him home. A very different way of encountering the Good Shepherd. One friend told me he was into transcendental meditation and that during the midst of a vision, a hand ripped back the vision and told him to follow Jesus Christ. He left TM behind and followed Jesus.

³ Christian Wiman. "Every Riven Thing" from the book *Every Riven Thing*. Straus and Giroux (August 12, 2014), pp. 22-23. To hear Wiman discuss this and other writing, visit PBS - <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/poet-christian-wimans-every-riven-thing/>

I was virtually born in the church. Grew up in family of faith. Professed faith in Jesus as a child. I never left the church. I never embraced the life of debauchery. Yet, I knew paralyzing fear. In high school, I was so terrified, particularly of the quiet of the night. The fear of hell. The fear of eternity. Every night I prayed for God to save me. Every night. Terrified.

After a profound encounter with the Spirit of God, I found peace and renewed joy. My college years felt like four years of revival, encounters with God, and the opening possibilities for what God might do in the future.

Right before I graduated the fear returned. It came with such force that after all these year, I continue to call that time “the darkness.” It seemed that the fear had swallowed God and I was alone. The sense of His presence and peace...gone. Everything in the world felt dark and empty and unreal. When I try to tell Christians about it, I hate to say, they had no understanding of what was going on. Most of the counsel I received made it worse.

I prayed. Cried out. Memorized Scripture. Struggled against the night. But the dark terror at the edge of my soul persisted. I fought through a year of dark.

Then one morning, sitting in the park, He came. The Good Shepherd walked into my fears. Psalm 139 became flesh in me.

*11 If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,”
12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you. ⁴*

In that moment, I knew love in a way that is beyond knowing or even speaking. I knew that He had never left. He had walked side by side through that dark night. I knew God was faithful, good, trustworthy. The Good Shepherd goes. God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made.

In other times, the Good Shepherd has walked into my life with love unspeakable, drawing me into the heart of the Father. Eleven years ago, I was laying in the dialysis clinic, feeling like my life was slipping away. The Good Shepherd walked alongside with a peace that passes understanding. All of us know these. Job loss or financial troubles. I have. It's not that they have been anguish free, but he has been present. Now my ministry, in the end, was only to bear witness to that. Simply that the Good Shepherd is present.

Though I love theology and philosophy and the history of the church, I also realize that knowledge will not help us without the Presence of Jesus Christ: the good news of Jesus Christ

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ps 139:11–12.

died, buried and risen again. I love the arts: music, painting, photography, theatre. The aesthetic form touches me deeply and can move me to tears.

But the only true beauty I have to give is testimony to the Beautiful One. The Risen Savior Jesus Christ. The Good Shepherd who walks among us even know. In songs of worship, in sermons of peace, in prayers for new life, we only but participate in His life. The Good Shepherd. The God who goes belonging to every riven thing He's made.

When we gather, the Good Shepherd walks among us. He is here, even now, as we sing, as we reflect on the word and exchange the peace. As we pray here in a moment, for the sick of the community. He is present. He goes right in the midst of it. This is why the Great Thanksgiving, the Eucharist is so fundamental to worship. Every week we rehearse the deeds of Jesus Christ, we bring our gifts of bread, wine, tithes, and offerings.

We also bring our gifts of intelligence, creativity, business, management, sales, kindness, hospitality and more. We bring all that we are to Him and that includes our fears, our failures, our sickness, our longing, our habits, our struggles. We bring all that we are to him: body and soul.

And you know what he does? God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made. Our Good Shepherd enters into our gifts. He gives Himself afresh to us in the bread and wine. He enters fully into our stories, our dreams and nightmares, our hopes, our longings, and even our failures. He walks into the valley of the shadow of death and leads us out to a feast, to abundant life.

Today, we come to the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. We come in and through His Spirit of Love. And we cry out to the Father for mercy and grace in our own lives and in the lives of the people in our community and our world. We stand before Him as children in need of healing and as priest, longing to see his healing hand touch our world.

And because of His Word and Testimony, I can proclaim with joy that He is here.